

Sermon on John 21: 1-19

The Comeback

Comebacks almost never work.

Swimmer Grant Hackett over these last couple of days has found that his body at 35 isn't conducive to competing with 20 year olds.

Kevin Rudd lasted only 6 months in his second stint as Prime Minister.

And

Comebacks rarely work. I remember when I was at high school a former student coming back to play a part in the school musical the year after he finished, but it just didn't work.

His time had passed and it all seemed a bit awkward.

Every so often when I'm watching the football (AFL that is of course...), I think to myself, oh just maybe one more year.

One more run around, relive the glory days!

Then I feel how stiff I am from moving a few tables around yesterday and I think, no maybe not.

Comebacks seem to be things we like to entertain, but are equally unlikely to accomplish successfully.

It just doesn't seem to work the second time around and perhaps we're foolish to try.

Peter and the disciples have reverted to type following the resurrection.

After all the amazing experiences of following Jesus, and even the astonishing realisation that he had risen, here they are back in their comfort zone fishing.

Home territory.

Familiar faces.

The routines of earning a living in their old profession.

Despite Jesus' sending them out to love and forgive and spread the word, it doesn't seem like they've gotten very far.

So they encounter Jesus again.

Or Jesus encounters them.

And they break bread on the beach.

And once they've finished eating Jesus takes aside his wayward head disciple and has a little conversation.

It can't have been comfortable for Peter.

He had denied Jesus three times and then fled.

You can imagine him, like the student entering the headmaster's office, nervous about repercussions, consequences.

Where's this going to end up?

Where's it going to lead?

Suspension, expulsion, who knows.

It's clearly a tense conversation.

Jesus uses Peter's former name – Simon, which must have been hard.

And then we're told directly that Peter was hurt when his Lord asked him for the third time, 'Simon, do you love me?'

Peter's incredulity seems somewhat misplaced.

What possible reason had he given Jesus to re-trust him?

In the normal run of things, everything he had done to this point should have convinced Jesus to cut him loose.

It's not going to happen.

2nd chance?

Maybe.

But not 4th and 5th chance.

Yet Jesus takes the remarkable step of asking Peter to make a comeback.

He forgives him, reinstates him, and sends him.

Back to the future.

Peter has failed dramatically, yet Jesus is not deterred.

Feed my lambs, tend my sheep.

The comeback is to the life of service Jesus called Peter to in the first place.

We sit here today in the church that Peter's comeback created.

Against every logical conclusion we might have drawn coming out of that day, against all the odds of where a faith based on self-sacrifice might go, here we are 2 millennia later still wrestling with the call to faithful action, and wondering, like Peter, whether we too have the faith to go on.

To play our part.

To feed Jesus' sheep in a world terribly in need.

To be part of the comeback.

All the elements of the Gospel can be found in John 21.

Reunion, forgiveness, reconciliation, hospitality, calling, service.

It's all here.

Even the hard toil of everyday living in which livelihoods and families are sustained.

But at the heart of it all is the question Jesus puts to Peter, 'Simon, do you love me?'

Can we give over our full selves to Jesus so that his life becomes ours in faithful service?

So that we can look through a different lens?

See things in a different way?

And so that by our words and deeds the love he has for each of us and the entire world becomes plain?

‘By this’, Jesus said earlier on, ‘will others know that you are my disciples, if you love one another as I have loved you.’

Commentators have made much of the fact that Jesus and Peter use different words for ‘love’ in the first two questions – Jesus agapao (the highest sacrificial love), and Peter phileo (the brotherly/sisterly love of friendship).

The third time, Jesus changes and uses phileo, in line with Peter.

Quite a bit of ink has been spilt hypothesising on why this might be the case.

This is the kind of thing scholars love.

Was Peter’s response not as whole hearted as Jesus wanted, and so he comes down to Peter’s level with the third question?

Was Jesus making a point about the greater expectations of the Gospel while recognising Peter’s inadequacy (like all of us) to live them out?

There’s no way of really knowing, but I think FF Bruce says it right when he writes, ‘What is important is that Peter reaffirms his love for his Lord, and is rehabilitated and recommissioned. The commission is a pastoral one.’

What’s important is that Peter and his Lord are reconciled, the relationship restored, and Peter sent out again to serve.

What’s important is Peter is being asked to make a comeback, a comeback that will help save us all and in which we now take part.

Just as Jesus has come back from the dead, so it will be in that same risen power that Peter and all the disciples will spread the word.

God is all about new beginnings.

Peter can be seen to represent us all individually of course, but also the church at large.

Jesus sits in our midst and asks us, 'Do you love me?', even after we've messed up for so long.

And strangely through our fumbling reply, 'Lord, you know we love you.', Jesus calls us likewise to 'feed my sheep'.

We can make a comeback too.

A comeback to the love and service of our Lord.

The vast majority of the church's life over history has been lived out in lives of quiet service, quiet prayer, quiet tending of Jesus' sheep.

We should never lose a worldwide perspective and the pressing moral issues of the day are always our concern as a people of faith.

The Gospel challenges worldly politics and agendas at every level and we should never be afraid to say so, even when we sometimes have a different sense of how.

Yet most of the love we will share and the good we will do in Jesus' name will be exercised in day to day relationships.

In families, at schools and workplaces, with friends, and people we meet in the street from day to day.

In local communities.

This is how Peter's commissioning has been shared in contexts of oppression, persecution, hostility, as well as comfort and peace.

And generation to generation the love of God and the service of our Lord has been passed down to our present time.

The people of faith keep on making comebacks, and oddly, for the most part, they seem to be successful.

For all its faults – and we should never overlook its faults – yet for all its faults, the church continues to proclaim God's alternate way.

You, we, are a part of this.

Every day we wake up and are faced with the questions, who are we?

What do we believe?

Who do we follow?

Jesus' ends his conversation with Peter with some familiar words, words with which Peter's whole life as a disciple began.

'Follow me!', and it's those same words with which he addresses us today.

Do you love me?

Feed my sheep.

Follow me!

And love one another.

Whatever has happened before, whatever mistakes you've made, or troubles you've faced, there is work to be done and I need you.

The world needs you.

Faith never sits still, it is always moving, always growing, always serving, always loving.

Peter's call turns out to be ours as well.

In other words, just as he is saying to Peter, so he says to us, 'It's time for a comeback.'

Amen.