

T. Austin-Sparks:

READING: John 21.

It is fairly generally agreed that this part of John's record is a kind of after-inspiration. The main narrative closed with the comprehensive statement of 20:30,31.

We have to try to see why John should have had this reaction from his closure and should have felt constrained to append this further episode with its several aspects. He evidently felt it important and necessary to do so. Hence it must not fail to register with us as being something more than an afterthought or a sudden recollection of an omission.

Firstly, we must realize that what is here is a part of Luke's emphatic statement: "To whom he also shewed [presented] himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

This, then, is an integral part of the purpose of the forty days. The Lord's definite purpose in that period (which was probationary and testing: the number forty always indicates that in the Bible) was - on the one side to detach His Church (here represented in another symbolic number - seven) from an old, purely earthly, sentient and natural relationship with Himself, and on the other side to establish a new basis of that relationship and service, that is, a heavenly, spiritual, and universal.

John had just written concerning Mary's sudden recognition of her Lord, probably by the way in which He spoke her name (20:16). He said to her: "Take not hold on me." This would at least imply that the old relationship and its physical form (Mary had anointed His feet and head) no longer obtained, but had changed. It was now a spiritual one entirely. John's Gospel is the one of spirituality; he called the miracles of Jesus "signs," meaning that they were intended to signify spiritual truths and principles and not to be just mighty acts. So this last part of the record is full of spiritual principles. These we must grasp.

Having seen, then, that the first principle is the new kind of relationship, let us take that a step further. This new basis requires that the men of the new dispensation be spiritual men, and their work is to be spiritual work. This is exceedingly testing to the natural man. Indeed, he cannot stand up to it. Until he receives the Holy Spirit as an indwelling reality, and so becomes a spiritual person basically, all attempts to cope with spiritual things will be defeated. "The natural man cannot know the things which are spiritual," said Paul (1 Cor. 2:14). Now this is borne out in the case of the central figure in the circle of disciples in our chapter.

Peter's Defection

It would seem evident that the new phase or form of things, which had come in with the Lord's resurrection - appearances and disappearances, was too much for Peter. He was no mystic. There was nothing of that in his makeup. He was just one of the very practical type, with whom policy is often more than principle. Things must just "come down to earth," and be "black and white"; one must "call a spade a spade." "Let's see exactly where we are," they say. "It is ends that matter, not so much how you reach them." To such, anything that cannot be defined in obvious explanation is not real; indeed it is most unsatisfactory.

So Peter, not made for this "uncertain" and "illusory" kind of life, cannot bear it longer, and he says: "I go a fishing." "That is practical and tangible, anyway, and we do have some qualification in that realm - we are at home there." Sensitiveness and imagination are not the strong points of this temperament. It rides roughly over delicate ground. Rough seas, and the practical features of a fisherman's life, are more in keeping with this disposition than tender lambs and foolish sheep. Indeed, it would sooner beard lions than feed lambs!

So "I go a fishing" is the reaction from the seeming uncertainties of the spiritual life. Peter was going to learn differently before long. Peter seems to have had a magnetic influence over others. Even the more spiritual John seems to have been affected by him. Although John had just recently outrun Peter to the tomb, his sensitiveness kept him from doing more than look in. But following up, puffing and blowing, came Peter, and he, without any such delicate restraint, "entered in." "Then entered in therefore the other disciple also." Unconscious influence! And so on this other occasion the rest said: "We also come with thee."

There is a strange and notable anomaly about this particular type of person. With all the physical venturesomeness, initiative, aggressiveness, and even self-confidence, there is the contrast between physical

and moral courage, to say nothing of spiritual courage. Peter is a well-known example, and the particular instances need not be pointed out. This representative seven will learn the fundamental lesson of the new age which had dawned.

So "they went forth, and entered into the boat; and that night they took nothing." "That night"!

We now have the background set for the message of the important "afterthought" or new urge of John in this "appendix" (?). But let us note at this point that a very great deal of spiritual value, enlargement, adjustment, and eternal significance may be bound up with frustration and disappointment. "That night" was a turning point. There is often Providence in reverses. Success along natural lines might seriously jeopardize or sabotage the whole spiritual intention of God! So, whether it be in a swift and almost immediate setback, or in a long-drawn-out sapping of gratification, a slow realization forced upon us that we are getting nowhere in the things that really matter, the faithfulness of God makes reverses and abortive labor one of His ways of deep education.

So, then, the inclusive lesson of this chapter is that of -

The Difference Between the Natural and the Spiritual

Natural capacity. Natural disposition. Natural ability. Natural direction. Natural energy. Natural courage. It is so evident that the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost meant a change in this whole realm. Note that this was just the point at which things went astray. The Lord had "charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). Peter said: "I go a fishing." Jesus had said much about the coming Holy Spirit. Peter said "I," and they said "We." Very well, then, there can only be "nothing" along that line! This is the age of the Holy Spirit, and apart from His absolute government the story must be one of toil for nothing where the Church is concerned.

Peter seems to have had little capacity for the spiritual he seems to have broken down at that point all along. See such instances as: "Lord, thou shalt never wash my feet"; "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee"; etc. But this capacity came in a new and wonderful way with the Holy Spirit. The same was true on all the other points mentioned above.

The Lord turned this many-sided difference upon one point, both in the symbolic act and in a final word. The point was -

Absolute Subjection to the Lordship of Christ

All the natural grounds of assurance being exhausted - training, experience, facility, ability, the suitable season, etc. - the Lord issued a challenge. It was a critical moment. All natural arguments would have been naturally justified in flouting the suggestion.

But it may have been the last resort of a forlorn hope, or something in the tone and manner of the command they obeyed.

Peter ever stands out afterward as the man who, when Christ prevailed, moved into a new fullness in a new realm - I leave you to follow that out. He is the great example of the principle that subjection to Christ is the way of spiritual fullness. This was the lesson of the early morning - the new day. This was the Lord's meaning when He said: "Truly, truly, I say unto thee, When thou was young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not."

The Lord knew Peter - that there was, and always would be, that element in him of "thou wouldest" or "wouldest not," but that in progressive and final submission he should "glorify God."

In this Lordship of Christ two further factors existed.

One, the whole question of the nature and quality of his love for Christ. It is so well known that in His threefold challenge to Peter (verses 15-17) the Lord used one word for love, while Peter used another and a lesser. We do not enlarge upon this, beyond pointing out that the quality of love is tested by our ability to let go to the Lord and empty ourselves of ourselves before Him.

The other thing is that -

Service Flows from Subjection and Love

The Lord had more than once sought to inculcate this principle with His disciples - notably in the feet-washing incident (chap. 12). It was the principle of His own coming and service. Through Paul it came out in its fullness (Phil. 2:5-8). He, our Master, emptied and humbled Himself, and became the Good Shepherd, laying down His life for the sheep. It was actuated, not by "fondness," but by "love." Not by protestations of love (as with Peter), but by proved and faithful - undenying - love.

This is the heart of this dialogue between the Master and the servant; the Chief Shepherd and the under-shepherd, in our chapter.

As we have said, it represents a change of disposition in Peter. Some thoughtful, patient and humble care is required to "feed my sheep," "Feed my lambs," and impulsive, erratic, blustering hotheadedness will not do; neither will self-will and self-confidence.

So the "third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after that he was risen..." (vs. 14) taught them the great principles of the new age of the Spirit into which they were entering:

1. Christ can, and must, be known only after the Spirit now, not after the flesh.
2. When we have become spiritual men and women by having received the Spirit, this is actually a more real way of knowing Him.
3. Working in the flesh from our own impulses; reactions or lapses from this heavenly resurrection position into natural efforts and energies, will result in "nothing."
4. The Lord, in mercy and grace, does not leave us finally in the despair of such failure, but even allows or orders the failure, to teach us the lesson that the way of abundant fullness is that of resurrection life and power.
5. The absolute Lordship of Christ is the supreme and inclusive law of life and service in this age, involving our utter submission.
6. That law may mean work for which we are not naturally qualified, or to which we are not temperamentally disposed, but for which ability comes by the fullness of the Spirit.
7. Although the situation is so strange and mysterious to all our natural make-up, and we need new and other capacities, yet it is more potent, fruitful and permanent than all that we could do on the level of human natural abilities.