

IS YOUR FUTURE AHEAD OR BEHIND?

Today's Text: Jn 21: 1- 25

Extracts:

Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twain, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. *Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We are going with you also." They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus....So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep" [Jn 21: 2-4, 15]*

Between 2005 and 2010, nearly 107,000 Britons migrated to Australia.¹ Understandably, they were leaving the difficult economic situation in Europe to take advantage of the booming Australian economy. However, during the same period, 30,000 Britons decided to leave Australia permanently and return home to the United Kingdom, in spite of the fact that the economic situation there had not improved. According to Professor Roger Barrows, a sociologist from the University of York (UK) who has studied the phenomenon, there are many explanations for such a change of mind, chief of which are missing friends and family and lacking a real sense of belonging. Therefore, for such returnees, their future was behind in the UK all along, not ahead in Australia!

Each new day, people are reappraising their future after going along a certain route for some time. It could be a career move or marriage or ministry. As in the story above, some people have moved from harsh economic environments to a promising and rosy future abroad only to discover that the green pastures in their dreams are synthetic turf in reality! Some have found out that even success has its problems. Some people have followed leaders that died or were disgraced and the followers found themselves abandoned or stranded. In this week's Bible text, the disciples of Jesus found themselves with much idle time on their hands after His death and resurrection. He no longer lived among them as before but visited them once in a while. So what should be the direction of their future? Let us find out how Peter and his friends tried to answer that question.

¹ Based on Mark Bosworth, "Why are so many Britons leaving Australia?" *BBC News*, 22 November 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15799571>

1. Background: Peter returns to fishing!

In the *Jackson 5*'s famous song, "Going Back To Indiana" (1971), the singer spoke of going back to Indiana where his baby (girlfriend or fiancée) came from. One section of the lyrics says, "Hollywood you got a lot of pretty things; I saw a lot of movie stars with diamond rings; But I ain't got my baby and I'm feeling wrong." Hollywood (in California) was drawing the increasingly famous group into a bigger future but they were missing their roots (Gary, Indiana). How about you? Every new year, most of us make fresh new year resolutions, suggesting that the future holds more promise than the past. But, as the year wears older, we hear some people reminiscing about the good old days, suggesting that their future is actually behind! What is it that makes us wander between the past and the future?

In this week's Bible text, Simon Peter, the leading disciple of Jesus Christ, invited six of his colleagues to come and fish with him after the death and resurrection of their Master [**Jn 21: 2-3**]. He did not tell us his motive but as the saying goes, "Action speaks louder than voice." Taking the totality of the story, we can look at an angle that helps us to understand our own situations. Let us first examine the story, as follows:

- a) *The new Jesus was not the One the disciples had known those past few years!*

We are told, "After these things Jesus showed Himself *again* to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias [same as the Sea of Galilee-**Jn 6: 1**]" [**Jn 21: 1**]. It was "the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples *after He was raised from the dead*" [v. 14]. That suggests that the disciples of Jesus were dealing with a new relationship problem at the time of this week's Bible text. The Jesus of Nazareth that they knew so well had been crucified. He died and was raised from the dead. He had become, in the words of Thomas Didymus (meaning twin), their Lord and their God [**Jn 20: 28**]. The Holy Spirit promised by Jesus had not yet descended on them because the Day of Pentecost was still in their future [**Acts 2: 1-4**]. Therefore, Peter and his colleagues were suffering from bouts of uncertainties about their future under the new dispensation.

How did you feel the day you first left home to go to college far away from home? Why did you cry in the arms of your mother the night before your wedding? Can you still remember how you and your spouse held hands tightly while you were being wheeled into the theatre for a major heart surgery? In all such cases, we face separation anxiety. The future is uncertain or at best risky. You may think that going back to the certainty of the known past is better! The disciples might have found themselves in a similar situation after Jesus the Man had left them to become Jesus the Christ.

b) *Peter and his friends returned to their former profession-fishing*

Peter was in the company of his Galilean colleagues- Thomas the Twin, Nathanael of Cana, the sons of Zebedee (James and John) and two other disciples. He said to them, “I am going fishing.” They replied him, “We are going with you also.” We are told, “They went out and *immediately* got into *the boat*, and that night they caught nothing” [Jn 21: 2-3].

Are you familiar with Nathanael? His name is mentioned only in John’s gospel: at the beginning [Jn 1: 43- 51] and at the end [Jn 21: 2]. The name is not listed among the twelve apostles [Matt. 10: 1-4; Lk 6: 12-16] but tradition associates his name with Bartholomew [Lk 6: 14]. When Philip first mentioned Jesus to him at the beginning of His earthly ministry, Nathanael was quite cynical, doubting if anything good could ever come out of Nazareth. But after Jesus had shown him a glimpse of His divine powers, by letting Nathanael know that He saw him before Philip called him as he stood under the fig tree, Nathanael said, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” [Jn 1: 43-49]. Now, after the resurrection of Jesus, Nathanael was there again to go with Peter- back to their known past!

We can draw the following conclusions from the actions of Peter and his colleagues:

- ***God can take you away from your past but only you can take your past away from your future.*** Peter and his colleagues “immediately” entered into “the boat,” suggesting that fishing was still in their bones even after walking with Jesus for the past three years. With such a mind set, they were likely to regress to familiar turf at the slightest test.
- ***You need to move forward because the turf that you consider familiar may not necessarily guarantee you better results.*** Peter and his colleagues knew the Sea of Galilee quite well. Yet, after a whole night of fishing, they caught nothing! That you have given up a trying marriage cannot fully restore the “free” life of the spinster or bachelor that you left behind years ago!

c) *Then Jesus returns!*

As the day broke, Jesus stood on the shore but Peter and his friends did not recognize Him! He asked them, “***Children***, have you any food?” They replied, “No” [Jn 21: 4-5]. Jesus called them children. Yet, before His Passion, He said to His disciples, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” [Jn 15: 14-15].

Jesus did not call Peter and his colleagues servants or friends but children. Why?

Jesus of Nazareth began His earthly ministry at about the age of 30 [Lk 3: 23], and He was thus younger than Peter and some of His other disciples. Therefore, the Jesus that showed up on the shores of the Sea of Galilee was Jesus the Christ, the “Mighty God [and the] Everlasting Father” [Is. 9: 6]. Those who have received Jesus and believed in Him have the right to be called children of God [Jn 1: 12]. Another plausible explanation is how Jesus saw the action of Peter and his friends. Remember that when Peter was called, Jesus told him, “***From now on*** you will catch men” [Lk 5: 10]. So, when a fisher of men returned to being a fisherman, he was behaving like a child. Childhood is in the past of an adult! Peter and his colleagues were looking for their future behind, not ahead.

Happily, when Jesus showed up, Peter and his colleagues were led back to the future for which Jesus had prepared them. The following remarkable developments should be noted:

- When Peter was called after the first miraculous draught of fishes, the net broke [Lk 5:6]. This time around, “the net was not broken” [Jn 21: 11]. ***When you stay on course in accordance with God’s plan, your future is better assured than your past.***
- Before the disciples could bring their catch of fish ashore, Jesus had already prepared breakfast for them, made up of bread and fish [vv. 11-13]. ***When you face your future by faith, you will be fed by God’s provisions, not necessarily from your sweat!***
- After breakfast, Jesus turned specifically to Peter and asked him a pointed question, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me ***more than these things?***” Twice more, He asked Peter if he loved Him. Peter’s answers confirmed that he had now fully understood and accepted that fishing (for fish) was now behind him and fishing for men was God’s future for him. ***By accepting his future in accordance with God’s plan, Jesus restored Peter to his leadership position among His followers.*** Peter should feed His lambs and His sheep [vv. 15, 16, 17].
- Jesus revealed to Peter that God’s future for him included death by martyrdom. Jesus told him, “When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” It was by such death that Peter was going to glorify God [vv. 18-19]. ***A certain future, no matter what is in it, is better than an unknown one. Only God can give you the former.***

Now, you are well equipped to deal with your own future. We shall take that up presently.

2. Lessons for dealing with your own future

Today is the future of your past as well as the past of your future. It is the only time that you have to be able to influence your life in the direction that you have chosen. That is why the word of God says, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” [Ps. 95: 7, 8; Heb. 4: 7]. Jesus added at the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” [Matt. 6: 34]. Therefore, to successfully deal with your future, you may find the following tips quite helpful:

a) *Only God knows your future*

For his future, Peter might have been thinking of fishing but Jesus had a different purpose for him- spreading the gospel of salvation [Matt. 28: 19]. Jesus made it quite clear to Peter that if he loved Him, he should feed His flock. Matthew was a tax collector [Lk 5: 27-28] and might have had the ambition to one day become a chief tax collector! But Jesus had a better future for him. He saw Matthew’s future as the writer of one of the four gospels in the New Testament.

Always remember that *what you love is what drives your life but only God knows what is good for you.* His plan is to give you a future and a hope [Jer. 29: 11]. That is why we are expected to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds and our neighbours as ourselves [Matt. 22: 37, 39]. What do you love the most? Is it material wealth? Is it fear of man? Remember that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil [1 Tim. 6: 10] and the fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord will be safe [Prov. 29: 25]. You cannot serve God and mammon at the same time [Matt. 6: 24]. So, you must decide today which God you depend on. Joshua made a sure choice when he declared before the children of Israel soon after they arrived the Promised Land, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” [Josh. 24: 15].

Jesus has said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me, you can do nothing” [Jn 15: 5]. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “Imitate me just as I also imitate Christ” [1 Cor. 11: 1]. When you have the mind of Christ, you will know the mind of God [1 Cor. 2: 16]. *When you know the mind of God, you will know your future.*

b) *Your future is defined by purpose, not time*

Jesus made clear to Peter the direction of his future: he would shepherd His flock and in old age die as a martyr. Therefore, Peter’s future was defined by God’s purpose for him, not time, defined by the past, the present and the future. For example, Amos was a successful farmer- a

sheep breeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then, God called him out as a prophet much later in life [**Amos 7: 14-15**]. Were his years as a farmer wasted? No, because his early morning dawned on the day he became God's messenger.

What has God called you to do for Him? Is it as an apostle or prophet or evangelist or pastor or teacher [**Eph. 4: 11**] or helper or administrator [**1 Cor. 12: 28**]? Are you deferring action until it is convenient for you? Jesus has said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [ephemeral] things shall be added to you" [**Matt. 6: 33**].

c) *Only faith can keep you on course!*

A dream ends whenever you wake up! Therefore, once God lays out for you which way to go, you must take the practical steps for "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" [**Jam. 2: 17**]. If God requires you to delay, do not hurry forward. If He requires you to wait, do not move at all. If He requires you to retreat, run! Forget human pride that can only lead you to shame and defeat. That way, it is immaterial whether you look ahead or behind. After all, if you want to increase speed, you must first slow down.

Always remember that success is unsafe at any speed! Moreover, the road to success is always under construction. Therefore, until the day God calls you home to heaven, your future is always ahead. You may need to rise and fall along the way. Therefore, you can look ahead or behind as long as it is God that is guiding your steps.

3. Conclusion: Focus on Jesus, the driver of your future!

Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me more than these?" He is asking you the same question right now. He has added, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" [**Lk 6: 46**]. ***When you look on to Jesus, He will guide your steps to eternal salvation in His Father's kingdom. It becomes immaterial which way (behind or ahead) you look because you keep looking at Him wherever He is!***

Focus on Jesus, the driver of your future!