

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Epilogue

Today's Gospel forms an epilogue to the fourth Gospel, whose original ending we read last Sunday. Perhaps some editor, belonging to the school of the original Evangelist, decided to add some of the stories left out by him. Why did he do this: what does the Epilogue add to the story of the Gospel?

The Commission to Peter

The obvious "next stage" after the Gospel stories is the beginnings of the Church. This was what made Luke turn from the end of his Gospel to write the Acts of the Apostles. Here the Fourth Gospel includes themes of mission and discipleship which were known to the Church where the Gospel was assembled, but not so far included in it. The chosen vehicle is the story of the miraculous draught of fishes. Luke had placed this story at the beginning of the Gospel, making it the place for the calling of Peter: I always think he wanted to give Peter some reason to *Leave everything, and follow*. In the Fourth Gospel we have seen miracles, but they are nearly always accompanied by prolonged discussion or teaching. Here, there is nothing like that, which makes the story already unusual. There follows the dialogue in which Peter is rehabilitated as a disciple. In place of the three denials of the Passion story, Jesus will ask him three times to pledge his love and obedience to the tasks of "feeding the lambs, looking after the sheep, feeding the sheep" - the work of the Church to pasture the world for Christ.

Fishing and Eating

In this Gospel the miracle catch of fish is followed by a beach barbecue, with Jesus as the host. In Luke there is no meal: the call of Peter leads to his "leaving everything" to follow Jesus. I remember, however, that in Luke's Gospel alone, the appearance of the risen Lord to the apostles includes his request: "*Have you something to eat?*" and they give him "*a piece of grilled fish, which he ate before their eyes*". Somehow, I can't believe that the risen Jesus and grilled fish should come so close in two different Gospels by mere coincidence. When you add in the story of the feeding of the multitude with *loaves and fish*, which takes place *on the seashore* in Jn 6, you have a strangely consistent theme; remember how, after that feeding, the disciples are out on the lake alone, when they see Jesus walking towards them across the water. They are terrified because they think they are seeing a ghost; but Jesus says: *Do not fear, it is I*. It is strange how these different stories have come to share the same themes. Matthew too tells the story of the feeding miracle, but he follows it with the

special story of Peter's role in the walking on the water story: *Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water!* At Jesus' bidding Peter leaves the boat and comes to Jesus across the waves; but then he takes fear and begins to sink. *O man of little faith - why did you doubt?* See how the Gospels mingle these themes and multiply the contexts for them, much as we muddle up our memories and perceptions when we dream, finding our childhood friends visiting us in old age, our teachers appearing in our foreign travels, our long-dead parents meeting us on the High-street, the Queen of England suddenly emerging out of our bathroom, and so on. I find reading these Gospel stories rather similar; the context keeps changing, but the themes are strangely constant.

Life after Easter

If Jesus' paschal ability to walk through walls means something more than a stunt, it is about the ability of the risen Christ to enter and transform closed lives. The first apostles' lives were very much closed, like their narrow minds. If the Gospel stories of the liberating power of this Person, who is God and Man, are themselves fluid and liable to appear freely at any stage of the Gospel, that seems to me to be entirely consistent with the truth they embody. There's a corollary in this fact for my real experience: that the compartments and blind alleys in which I find myself are no longer impenetrable for the Shepherd; there is no place on earth where life can be lived beyond the pale, outside the ambit of the Resurrection. So we must be particularly careful that we don't relegate Jesus to some far-off past where he becomes unreachable to us. The Resurrection has changed all that. It's what we mean when we say that Jesus is alive: he is liberated to enter any of our lives at any point, and any point of my life can be the place where he reveals himself to me as he did for St Paul. I can find myself in the dark, on my own, far from well, far from happy, far from peace - but I am not far from Christ, recognisable even at night, even in fear, always greeting me with *peace be with you: yes, it is I indeed*.

Fr Philip