

PoP - 23.4.17

Text: John 21.1-4a

It was in this week quite some years ago now that a little girl of 5-6 years old walked down the aisle carrying a rose to place on the coffin of her mother, a 27-year-old woman who had died of a heroin overdose. When the young mother's parents heard the news, they were just numb. Put yourself in that situation. How would you keep going? I mean, the next day, and the day after, and the day after that?

Wouldn't you feel an enormous emptiness like a sharp knife had been pierced into the depth of your soul and gouged out everything that was there so that there was nothing left?

You'd remember: remember the good things, the happy times, times when things were different and it would be hard to keep going. On the day after that funeral, they received the news that the little girl's father had also died in similar tragic circumstances.

Think of the kind of Easter it must have been for the Coptic Christians in Egypt who saw 45 of their community killed in

a bombing attack on Palm Sunday, a day marking the entry into Jerusalem of the one called Prince of Peace! The emptiness. The feelings of despair. Or in a few days we will commemorate those who died in war as Anzac Day ceremonies take place. Whatever we say about war, and we talk about heroism, bravery, sacrifice, we can never underestimate the impact any war has emotionally and spiritually, on people, especially those who have lost a loved one through war. And that's true for those on every side – we must never forget that.

Not too many of us have experienced anything like those kinds of losses. Some of us have experienced the loss of someone we love in some other way, and that has left its scars on us. Some of us know what it is like to be separated from someone close to us. Some of us have said goodbye too many times to friends we've made, and we know what it feels like when they've gone.

But there are other times, comparatively less dramatic times, but times which are real for us, when we feel a sense of pointlessness. It may be trying to achieve something but never quite getting there. It may be a sense of futility about

work. We can handle it most of the time but every now and then we become aware that we're not really challenged or not really enjoying what we do. Sometimes we can feel that we're getting older and just the thought of not ever being young again, not having that same energy again – that thought makes us feel a certain emptiness inside. It's a common feeling, and most of us experience it in some form or another.

Simon Peter is feeling that way. This once energetic, overpowering, someone even suggested “hyper-active” man had become just a shell of what he once was. The best thing that had ever happened to him had come screeching to a deadening halt. For a time, he'd felt so sure of himself, so certain about his place and where he belonged and what he was all about. Everything seemed to make sense and it was a wonderful thing. He would look back on each day with a glow of satisfaction and he would look to the next day with an enthusiasm that almost made it hard to sleep. He'd never talked so much, never laughed so much, never wondered so much, never been touched to the core of his being as much as he had in the last three years. And now it had all come to an

end. He feels a numbness, a hollowness, an aching emptiness inside and it won't go away.

I'm going fishing! Why not? Something to do! Fill in the time. Kind' like: "I'm going for a walk!", "I'm just going for a drive!" or whatever it is that you do when you want to get away because staying where you are isn't making any sense. And his other friends say, ***We'll come with you!*** "If you wanna'! Who cares? Come if you want, don't if you don't wanna'" And so they go. Not with the usual sense of anticipation. Not really with their minds on the job. Somehow being out there on the lake reminded them of how it once was. The place in the bow of the boat was empty. But they could remember. It wasn't hard. He had a presence which was overpowering. ***So they went out in the boat, but all that night they didn't catch a thing.***

Isn't that just typical! If it doesn't rain, it pours! Not only do we feel this awful emptiness inside, but we go and do what we can do best and don't catch a bloody thing! What an irony for Peter and his friends! Fishermen who can't even fish! Empty nets, empty hearts!

Isn't that the way? Can you remember? Things seem to want to heap themselves one on top of the other. Not just this, but now that! One big bill you're going to struggle to pay and another one comes along. You have headaches at work and you come home and the headaches seem to have followed you home. You look outside and the sky is kinda' grey and dull like the reflection of your soul!.... *They didn't catch a thing!*

As the sun was rising, Jesus stood at the water's edge.

As the sun was rising, Jesus stood at the water's edge. Oh my! Just imagine that! Empty nets and empty hearts and as the sun rose promising a new day, Jesus stood at the water's edge. You ever seen that? You ever felt so overwhelmed, so down in spirit, so lifeless, and looked up and Jesus stood before you? I guess that's probably a bit too dramatic for most of us. And it's worth noticing that for Peter and his friends it wasn't just like somebody waved a magic wand and presto! the emptiness was filled, the sadness wiped away, their pointlessness replaced with a spontaneous sense of purpose. Jesus stood at the water's edge and it was too good to be true. It couldn't be! It's a very cruel optical illusion, like a mirage. Grief which doesn't

want to let go can sometimes play those kind of tricks. It takes time for them to realise that what they see is real. It's an amazing thing, a totally unexpected thing, but it revitalises Peter and nothing can stop him from getting out of the boat before they even reach the shore and making his way to Jesus. Can you imagine him: tears streaming down his face, yelling and whooping, and just like Peter of old, wanting to be first? Jesus was there and things would never be the same again.

It was hard to know what to say to the people who were at the funeral years ago. I felt something of their emptiness. I found out that years and years ago that mother had been baptised, as it happens, in a Lutheran church. That doesn't in itself make her baptism any more special than any other baptism, but it was something I could latch on to. God had made a promise to her for her life that in whatever she experienced he would be there for her, standing on the water's edge, as Jesus did that morning. He was there for her for her first gasp of air and he was there for her last! (We got that little girl into our school, she was baptised and graduated. She heard about this Jesus over and over again). For those people at that funeral and for you and for me that

is something we can know and be sure of regardless of what is going on in our lives. It was even harder to know what to say to those parents/grandparents the day after the funeral when more bad news hit them. Be hard to know what to say to those Coptic Christians. Hard to comfort someone who has lost someone in war. To know that God is there is probably one of the most important things you can know. And it's one of the most important things to tell your children and teach to them from when they are very small. The kind of emptiness we might experience they aren't going to know yet in the same volume. But they, in their own way, know what it is to be disappointed, to be let down, to feel alone, to suffer blows to their self-esteem. And the best thing we can pass on to them is that awareness that God is with them. One of the best things we can pass to our friends, to those we want to share our faith with but don't know how to go about it, is to let them know, whether they want it or not, believe it or not: God cares, he's there, close-by, if only they were to look out of the gloom, look toward the shore – he would be there standing there, for them. One of the best things we can share with each other is not just the willingness to sit down and share the emptiness of the other person, but to offer them some hope. Not the kind of hope that belongs to a magical world where things turn to gold

overnight, but hope that sees Jesus, the living Jesus, and bit by bit comes to realise that emptiness can turn into fullness.

Jesus stood at the water's edge. For Peter and his friends that must have been the most wonderful sight they had ever seen. That must have given them a memory they must never have forgotten. He has stood there for you, if you look back and think about it. And he will stand there again. For Peter and his friends that was the first they'd ever experienced of what Easter is. Their emptiness had cause to be a deeper, hollower emptiness than ours because the possibility of anything else wasn't in their wildest imagination. We will experience that again – it's part of human experience. But we have the opportunity of having known for longer what they only experienced then. That sight of Jesus by the water's edge is one we are able to see even when we're in the middle of emptiness. It tells us that there is an end to the frustration and the restlessness and the pointlessness and there's a new day, as the Old Testament says *fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise*. Remember the picture. The picture of Jesus on the sea shore. Plant it in your mind and in your heart. Let it

work for you. That's how the Easter event becomes not just an item of faith but a factor that affects our lives.

They went out in a boat, but all that night they did not catch a thing....As the sun was rising, Jesus stood at the water's edge.