



A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP GREGORY  
ON THE FEAST DAY OF CATHERINE OF SIENA, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020

“I am going fishing” said Simon Peter.

“We will go with you”, [*the other disciples*] replied.” (John 21.3)

**A**fter all that had happened – three years of ministry with Jesus, the tumultuous events at Jerusalem, the betrayal of Jesus, the trials, the crucifixion, the tomb, the *empty* tomb, the resurrection appearances – at the end of it all, Peter says that he cannot think of anything better to do than to go fishing.

The story comes right at the end of the Gospel according to John, and Peter basically decides to go back to his old ways. It feels almost as if he’s said, “Right, that was exciting, but back to normality now everyone.” And we know what is going to happen in the story: the most life changing episode for Peter of all is just around the corner. (I’m not going to tell you; if you don’t know, go and read Chapter 21 of John’s Gospel.)

We might be forgiven for wanting to go back to normality. We’ve had the strangest Easter of our lifetimes, and things may have been absolutely awful, and, for others, in some way perhaps a little bit exciting, but we’re probably all ready for lockdown to be over, and to get back to normality.

It is not going to happen. First of all, lives have been changed, scarred by tragedy, swayed by experience in caring for Covid patients, by the experience of isolation. Society, I think, will be more wary, and even when the Government lets us, we may not want to rush back into crowded rooms and occasions, especially if the virus is still lurking around somewhere. Secondly, the Church has changed. We’ve learned to hold meetings remotely; we’ve learned to worship and to pray differently. We’ve missed some things, but perhaps have unconsciously already let go of others. The diocese’s budget is completely thrown out, and for some, businesses are undermined, and work isn’t coming back.

The Easter message is really telling us not to look back. Jesus is in our future, not our past. (Well, he may have worked great miracles in our past, and changed lots, but he doesn’t stay there.) He beckons us onward, and says “Come and follow me, I am making all things new.” We have a great opportunity now, to look at our Church, and at the mission of our Churches, in a new way. What is really important? What does Jesus say about clinging onto “this” or letting go of “that”? We can look at our faith, and say, “Where now, Lord?” Almost certainly, it will be for us as it was for the disciples – not back to the same old ways.

Catherine of Siena broke all the rules. A Dominican nun, she rebuked bishops and kings, and, in a man’s world, she held her own ferociously. She was simply amazing. She winkled the Pope out of exile in Avignon, and chivvied him back to Rome, brokered peace between the Pope and Florence, marshalled the Church and wrote a spiritual classic. She was among two women (with Theresa of Avila) who were the first to be recognised as Doctors of the Church – the top slot as a Christian teacher. She died on this day in 1380. Her vision was quite simply that the Church needed to be what Jesus wanted it to be – effective in witnessing to God’s truth and God’s love.

I take heart from Catherine because her indefatigability, and I pray that when the day comes for us to come out of lockdown, we won’t just want to go back to the old ways; to be tempted, like the disciples, to go back to fishing. “We are an Easter people, and Hallelujah is our song” said St Augustine.: Hallelujah is, of course, the Hebrew for “Let’s praise the LORD God”, and praise we must, not only with our lips, but in our (changed) lives.

Every blessing be with you,