

“The Other Side” a sermon preached in Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 10 April 2016, based on John 21:1-19.

For many years I have been inspired by the courage of King George VI: a somewhat shy, painfully stammering man, a family man, who as Duke of York never imagined he would become King, who never wanted to be King. When it seemed inevitable his older brother Edward would abdicate and George would become King, he was extremely upset. George VI did not think highly of himself. His father King George V had had a view of what a man should be. For example, George VI wrote left-handed, something actively discouraged. He was trained to write with his other hand. It is said that it deepened his sense of inadequacy and failure and added to the pressure of his stammering. He was thoughtful and conscientious and courageous trapped in a certain way of being. George V and others could only imagine people writing with their right hand.

There was a church, not this one, that had grown in numbers of participants through the 1950s. People who had been in the church at that time kept remembering what it was like to have hundreds in the Sunday School and Bible Class, two packed services, people peering down from the balcony. They remembered the energy, sermons being published in the local newspaper, the minister being invited to pray at civic events. They told stories of whole rugby teams coming to the Sunday evening service, of couples meeting there and marrying, of children being baptised. It was for them such a good time that it came to epitomise what Church really was, how it was to be, what it was at its best. It was hard to imagine another way of being church.

I know this tendency in myself. I have had certain experiences and certain training and a certain background that have led me to behave in a certain way, especially when facing challenges. Sometimes, in the face of challenge, with an earnestness fed by conviction, I have become more determined still, keeping on a certain track, responding in a certain way, walking a known path. Yet the harder I have tried, the more earnest I have become, the longer I have walked on this path, sometimes the more blinkered I have become, the less open to other possibilities, and the less helpful I have been.

Sometimes we imagine that the way to succeed is to be more earnest, more determined, more persistent, more efficient. Of course there is a time and place for all this, yet there is a danger that in being single-minded we miss the abundance on the other side.

In the story today, the disciples fished for the whole night, yet caught nothing - a whole night of casting the net into the lake, time after time after time – no fish.

To quote the Beatles, it was a hard day's night and they'd been working like dogs.

Why did they fish from only one side of the boat?

Were they all right handed, and so it was their natural movement, the casting of the net in a certain rhythm?

Had they only ever seen fishing done that way?

Had there been so much fish in the lake that they had only needed to fish from this side, and never try the other side?

But now the net was empty.

As morning broke, a stranger stood on the shore.

A stranger at a distance from them, with a wider view, a broader scan – cast your net on the other side, he said.

Even though they were experienced and knowledgeable and trained, they had got to the point they were willing to listen. They recognised emptiness when they saw it.

As we know from the movie, it was Lionel Logue who managed to get George VI to the other side of the boat. Through techniques now commonly used, the King came to think of himself as less of a failure, less trapped, more capable, more confident, more free. And you can hear it as his speaking improves. Indeed, there comes a time where he makes a speech without hesitation except for a particular word. Logue asks him, why did you hesitate then – you have never hesitated on that word before? Because, said the King, playfully, if I never hesitated they might think it wasn't really me.

As for me, other people help me see what I cannot see. Sometimes I have only been diverted from the known way when after a whole night of fishing I have realised my net is empty. Failure is not a bad thing, depending on what we do with it, on what it helps us become.

But sometimes, it's more play than pain that takes us to the other side.

Twenty years ago I spent time at the Mt Eliza Business School on the Mornington Peninsula out from Melbourne. It was a safe environment, away from peers and colleagues and supervisors. Each of us had a mentor, an experienced leader who one on one questioned our assumptions, our patterns, our ways, with care and warmth and heart. I was never afraid. And because I was never afraid I was able to be absolutely honest about my strengths and weaknesses. And so I grew.

A community that trusts and heartens and plays enables us to experience an abundance we had not previously known.

Attending to the stranger on the shore, pointing out alternatives.

When the disciples experience abundance, they know the stranger must be Christ. And this Christ still comes to us, bringing perspective, pointing to abundance. He enables us to haul from the other side, again and again and again.

The risen Christ does that for congregations. It's the reaching out, listening for Christ, that makes us church. In the bulletin I have adapted some questions borrowed from Steve Taylor, our speaker next week, who also borrowed them. These kinds of questions can help us as a congregation listen to the stranger, the person beyond our frame, beyond our gathering, beyond our pattern. And in the rhythm of listening, attending, responding, we become church. A church lives by listening to the stranger, the living Christ.

We see this shift to the other side in Peter.

If any man had reason to be trapped by his past, it was Peter because of what had happened around a charcoal fire just days before.

Sitting around a charcoal fire, three times Peter denied being a follower of Jesus. Three times, and then the cock crowed.

Shocking, tragic, devastating, shameful.

And today, even at his practised profession, for a whole night he had fished without catching anything. Here was a man surely with nothing to give, nothing to offer, nothing to achieve. He should have gone away and been forgotten. Empty. Peter

But that is not how Jesus sees him, so it is not how Peter sees himself.

On hearing it was Christ, Peter plunges into the water and swims towards Jesus.

Then at the charcoal fire – with the three betrayals still echoing, with the sound of the crowing cock still echoing, with the smell of the charcoal fire still remembered, it is Peter who hauls in the net full of fish so everyone can eat.

And despite all they know of him, Peter is welcomed around the fire, in a meal of bread and fish.

And Jesus offers Peter healing, a fresh start, a new future, an abundant life.

Three times Jesus points not to Peter's lack of faith, but to his fundamental motive – love, to his essential purpose - feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

And not on his own - for when he faces his greatest challenge, there will be people who fasten a belt around him, who will do what you cannot do, who will help you.

This story is my story, our story.

This Christ is my Christ, our Christ.

He helps us, me, deal with emptiness.

He opens us/me to the stranger.

He helps us/me fish on the other side.

He points us/me, not to my lack but to my driving motive, my essential purpose.

He empowers us/me to live from abundance.

He keeps restoring us/me in community, even a community we, I betray, sometimes in the most appalling way.

He keeps giving warmth and food and hospitality, with companions on the way.

May this church be such a community, listening to the stranger on the shore, the Christ beyond us.

May this church help people know Christ, so they and we live from and for abundance.

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**KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**  
*growing in courage to live the Jesus way*



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