

**The Charcoal Fire. Hebrews 4:12-16, John 21:4-14. Mike Starkey, 13 May 2024.**

Every so often you notice something in the Bible you hadn't noticed before. And you realise you've found something amazing, that's going to change the way you understand things. That happened to me a while back, when I was reading St John's Gospel.

It's the section towards the end of the gospel reading we heard a moment ago. It's after the resurrection of Jesus, when Jesus appears to some of his disciples as they're fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus appears to them on the shore of the lake. He asks them if they've caught any fish, and they say no. So he suggests they throw out the net on the other side of the boat. And when they do that, they have a huge catch of fish. They all recognise it's Jesus, and Peter's so keen to see him again he can't wait till the boat reaches the shore, so he jumps in and swims to the shore. The others then come ashore as well to meet Jesus.

Then here's the bit that rang a bell: 'When they got there, they saw that a *charcoal fire* was burning and fish were frying over it, and there was bread'. In some versions it says a fire of burning coals, but the literal meaning of the original Greek word is a *charcoal fire*. The Greek word is *anthrakia*, from which we get the English word *anthracite* (French: *anthracite*) which is a type of coal. *Anthrakia* literally means a fire of burning charcoal (*charbon de bois*).

Now... I knew that rang a bell from somewhere, but I couldn't remember where. So I did a bit of digging. And I realized that the previous appearance of a charcoal fire was a few chapters earlier in John's Gospel. John 18:18: 'The guards and the household servants *were standing around a charcoal fire* they had made because it was cold. And Peter stood there with them, warming himself'. Same word in the original language: charcoal fire.

So I thought, that's interesting. The same image recurring. And then I thought: what if it's more than an accident? What if there's a meaning here? John the gospel writer seems very specific. It was a *charcoal fire*: why bother with that kind of detail? And when I saw that second charcoal fire, at the side of the lake, I realised it *was* deliberate.

The first charcoal fire is in a courtyard. And this courtyard is part of the house of a man called Annas, a high-ranking Jewish religious official. Remember: this is still before Jesus's crucifixion. Jesus has been taken to the house of Annas, to be questioned. And Peter's trying to follow at a safe distance and not be spotted as one of Jesus's followers.

So Peter stands there in an outer courtyard of the house, warming himself against a charcoal fire. And as he stands there, a number of people recognize him, as one of Jesus's followers. As Peter stands next to this charcoal fire, warming himself, three separate people ask him if he's one of Jesus's friends. And each time, he says no.

Peter doesn't want to end up on trial as a troublemaker as well. So he denies three times that he even knows Jesus. In fact, Matthew and Mark's gospels say Peter starts swearing as he denies Jesus three times by the charcoal fire!

So when it comes to the crunch, how loyal is Peter? Answer: not at all. Incidentally, this all comes after Peter has explicitly said to Jesus that he'd never deny him. Even if everybody else deserts Jesus, he never would. And on the very first occasion this is put to the test, he fails at the first hurdle. He stands by the charcoal fire in the courtyard and flatly denies any connection with Jesus at all.

Then, you have this other charcoal fire, the one Jesus lights at the lakeside, after he's risen from the dead. Now that has to be deliberate. It's the moment when Jesus and Peter come face to face again, after all the traumas of the past few weeks. Peter is given another chance to prove where his heart really lies. He's given another chance by Jesus. So again, he stands by a charcoal fire, warming himself. Remember, he's just got out of the lake, cold and dripping.

And what happens next? Here's the clincher. Jesus asks Peter the same question three times: 'Peter, do you love me?' Now, in our society men don't usually say that sort of thing to each other! But it wouldn't have sounded odd or embarrassing to Peter. Jesus is saying: 'Are you committed to me, and what I want you to do? Are you ready for what happens next? Are you on board?' And Jesus asks him three times. In fact, by the third time Peter's getting fed up and confused. Why does Jesus keep on asking the same question when he's already given the same answer twice?

Why *would* he ask three times? Well, why the charcoal fire? He asks three times because the last time they met, Peter denied him three times. It's as if Jesus rewinds the film. He rewinds the film to the point where Peter is standing warming himself against a charcoal fire and he's asked three times if he's a friend of Jesus, he's asked three times if he's part of the controversial new Jesus movement. And three times he says No.

Jesus now takes him back to that moment and gives him another chance. He stands with Peter beside a charcoal fire and asks three times if he loves him, if he's on board for the next stage of the story. And this time Peter says yes. Three times.

And here's the thing. What Jesus did for Peter he can do for us too. The heart of the Christian faith is this: loving God, and loving people. That's Jesus's own definition of what life's all about. But as we all know, both kinds of relationship can be damaged and broken. And so many people limp on year after year, with a damaged or broken relationship with another person, or with a damaged or broken relationship with God.

So here's a thought. What if this morning, Jesus were to offer to rewind the DVD for you, as he did for Peter? Firstly, in your relationship with another person. What moment would you return to and say or do something different?

And secondly in your relationship with God. Was there a point at which you turned away from God? Or an era of your life when you lost interest or drifted away from an earlier stronger faith? And have you found it hard to return?

There can also be times when groups of people drift away from committed faith in Jesus too. Groups of friends, or families, or even churches. But more often it happens to individuals. A person loses their grip on a faith they once had.

Well, what if I were to say that this morning, Jesus offers you the chance to rewind the film as he did for Peter? What will you do or say this time round? And what difference will that make in your life today, this week, for the rest of your life?

Jesus gives Peter a moment of reconciliation. A moment of hope and healing. A second chance. And Peter's response to that changes everything: for Peter himself and for the rest of human history. Today, Jesus offers that same chance to you and to me: to restore relationship, to find the same hope and healing Peter found.