**SERMON FOR EASTER 3 at 8am | 01.05.2022**

**Acts 9: 1-9; Revelation 5: 11-14; St John 21: 1-14**

**I am of an age. I guess, to find it nigh impossible to approach these readings without hearing the stentorian tones of Margaret Thatcher, in that famous speech made to the Conservative party Conference on October 10th, 1980: *To those waiting with bated breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the '***[***U-turn***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flip-flop_(politics))***', I have only one thing to say: 'You turn if you want to*. *The lady's not for turning!' I say that not only to you but to our friends overseas and also to those who are not our friends...* You may even remember the context, her response to ‘the wets’ and their appeal for a liberalisation of the economy in the face of a recession and a serious rise in unemployment which had reached 2 million by the autumn of that year. But that is now for the history books; the rhetoric lives on!**

**Mrs Thatcher: apparently *not for turning.***

**These two great stories - the dramatic (and equally classic) story of St Paul, blinded on the Damascus Road and the third Resurrection appearance of Jesus, when Jesus comes alongside the disciples after a fruitless night of fishing – both want to take us in a quite different direction. To have a ‘Damascus Road’ experience is a common enough expression – for believers and non-believers alike: it talks about a sudden change of heart; it is about new beginnings.**

**St Paul is gunning for the new Christian community spreading alarmingly fast beyond Galilee and Judea. The faith had already spread to Damascus and he was taking arrest warrants to round up as many as he could find. It has much of the rabid mindset of the Russians in Donetsk and Luhansk. It isn’t individuals that matter: what drives these campaigns is the desire to eradicate any minority who would challenge the status quo and the powers that be. Paul was equally ‘not for turning’.**

**Most of us can recognise that brazen, stubborn inability to look at alternatives – at least in other people! The challenge for us, daily, as Christians, is to be able to discern when we have developed that blindness in ourselves; when we – genial and liberal as we think ourselves to be – really have got stuck in ways of thinking which are simply not helpful or even healthy. We tell ourselves that we are open to rational argument but are we, really?**

**Much of the challenge, of course, comes from fear. The role of poor Ananias, the leader of the Damascus Christians, in this story is to make just this point. To say he was hesitant to meet with Paul is putting it mildly: he was almost certainly terrified. What if this was all a big ruse and Paul was pulling a fast one on him and his people? Who would thank him for not being highly sceptical of this apparent change of heart on Paul’s part?**

**Equally what kind of response would the other disciples have shown to Peter if he had persuaded them to spend yet more hours on the lake that day – just because the ghost of Jesus had suggested an alternative place to fish – and they had ended up, yet again, with nothing? Ananias, Peter: they both had to overcome huge reservations. We can almost smell the fear of failure.**

**And yet that is what our exposure to the living Christ is all about. If we had time to read more of the story of Acts, we would hear Jesus saying to Ananias, *I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.* To follow Jesus in any meaningful way is to accept that suffering is part of the deal. The second reading from the strange Book of Revelation expresses it like this: It is *the Lamb who was slain who is deemed worthy to receive power and wealth, wisdom and might, honour and glory and blessing.* In Jesus’ parable of the Talents, it is those who risk using what they have received who get the Brownie points; the man who dug a hole and buried the money lest it got lost, is the one whom Jesus’ condemns.**

**I think today’s Gospel story is especially interesting. Without Jesus being there, driving them to new things, St John suggests that there was already a tendency after the Crucifixion to go back to the old life - and the fishing that they knew so well – as if the three years with Jesus had just been an extended interruption to their lives.**

**So meeting up with their Lord and Master, unexpected as it was, is both a challenge and a restoration. Peter can leave behind the sad resignation, self-questioning and confusion (I’m going fishing’) and allow himself to be restored. With Jesus in his life, every day is new start, to take risks and be changed. And if we didn’t quite catch St John’s reference to baptism here, see how the fisherman, who would normally have been working naked, puts on clothes as he leaps over the side to follow Jesus. At the Font, when we learn to ‘*turn to Christ*’, then are *we are clothed with Christ*. A nice detail!**