

So long, and thanks for all the fish

What is it with Jesus and fish?

His first disciples were fishermen. He tells them they'll catch not fish but people. He fed 5,000 men plus dependents people with two fish and some bread. One of his memorable stories was about a great fishing net. In John's resurrection accounts, he cooks his disciples fish on a sea-shore. And here he is, in Luke's Upper Room, asking them for fish. There's definitely something fishy about Jesus.

And what is it about the Resurrection? That's definitely a bit fishy too. Are we really expected to believe that a dead man has returned to life? Or is it, perhaps, poetic licence? A beautiful expression of the triumph of hope over adversity, but not to be actually believed?

Well there are plenty of critics of Christian faith who would tell us just that. And not a few within the church too. It's an easier message for a skeptical age to swallow – or to discount. It never happened. They imagined it. Or, perhaps, a later generation constructed it. That's so plausible. It could even be true.

The problem is – take away the Resurrection, and you take away the faith. It's not as if there's a version of Christianity where you can keep the ethics and ceremony, but ditch the Resurrection. Well, I suppose there is – it's called humanism. Christianity without the fishy bits.

But Jesus liked fish – almost as much, it seems, as he liked bread and wine. And here he is, back in the upper room with that core band of first believers, solid flesh and blood, and asking for a piece of fish.

And while we're about it, what is it with Jesus and the Scriptures?

Fish eaten, what does he do next? He tells them that everything that's happened, all they've seen and heard whilst with him, is precisely 'what is written'. Indeed, if you know the story, you'll recall that he's said just the same thing, earlier in the day, to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. From Temptation in the Wilderness to his first sermon at Nazareth, from the Cleansing of the Temple to his Dying on the Cross, and throughout his recorded life on earth, what's found in Jesus' mouth is the words of the Scriptures.

And not just the words, but the meaning. As it says here: "Then he opened their minds to *understand* the Scriptures". Almost anyone, I guess, can read Scripture. But taken alone it's just a book, or rather a series of apparently, puzzling, disconnected, contrary books. But *understood*, as testimony to the work of God in history, culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and leading forward into the life of the church; understood correctly, it's the key to what we're meant to be about here on earth. Which is why, of course, both the reading and the exposition of Scripture have always held a place at the heart of Christian worship. And why it's so important for individual Christian like you and me to find ways that work for us of reading and getting to grips with the Bible.

By Scriptures Jesus meant, of course, our Old Testament. He traced all that he did amongst them to what those Scriptures had said "had to come true". Within a generation or so, the church added to that the *New Testament* - four apostolic accounts of Jesus' life and a series of writings and letters that record and document the earliest life of the community Jesus inspires and creates.

Inspires and creates, not least by the very words he uses here – "The message must be preached", and again "You are witnesses of these things". So Jesus has a thing about Scripture almost as much as he does about fish.

And here Luke's story, nearly, ends. There's a few more verses which are saved for another day's exposition – albeit some key verses about power, and about ascension – which bridge the way into his second volume, which we call Acts.

But both Luke and Acts also bridge the way into the third volume, which both Scripture and Jesus tell us to expect. The volume that you and I write today, with our lives, our words and actions.

Because if the comment "You are witnesses of these things" may have been spoken to the handful present in the upper room, the challenge that "the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations" is most definitely one that falls into our court.

And ever since then, in all sorts of societal conditions, to all sorts of people, and with varying degrees of faithfulness and effectiveness, we have been doing just that. Preaching the message – both fishy and scriptural. That life-changing encounter with our maker is both possible and required of us human beings.

We're doing it today, in this Cathedral. Churches across the city and county are too – of all flavours of Christianity. My job, to bring the vision that is the Cathedral Square project into being, is one manifestation of that. Your life, today, tomorrow, and into the future, is another. We, too, are witnesses of these things – not of the actual ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, it's true, but of the impact he makes in lives today, of the collective challenge that the community he founded brings to our city, our county, our world. We are caught up in something bigger than ourselves, bigger than our times, bigger than our world even. As big as the universal purposes of God – which begin in creation, call out the nation of Israel, find supreme focus in on the life of Jesus, and now rest with our generation.

"These are the very things..." "This is what is written." "The message must be preached". "You are witnesses".

It's offensive to the religious. It's nonsense to the intelligentsia. But for us who believe, it's life-changing gospel.

And we – we, are the witnesses today.

That's not just fishy. That's Galactic. That's Life, the Universe and Everything.