

What's the story?

Third Sunday of Easter, 4th May 2025

Readings [Acts 9.1-6](#), [John 21: 1-19](#)

'The people have spoken,' said a victorious candidate in Thursday's elections. But what had the people said? There the stories differ.

'We have supplanted the Conservative Party as the main opposition' – Reform; 'We must go further and faster on making the change that people want to see' – Labour; and so on, with the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Greens. Differing stories, all based on the same wordless data of pencil crosses on ballot papers. Still, we live by stories, and stories can stick, so get yours out fast.

With the story of Easter, first up is St Paul, whose conversion we see in the first reading. Paul's letters are our earliest Easter documents. They don't offer wordless data but convictions, based on what he implies are checkable events. In his First Letter to the Corinthians ([1 Corinthians 15.1-6](#), written perhaps barely twenty years after the first Easter) he tells us what had been handed on to him: Jesus died for our sins; was raised from the dead; and then appeared to people, some of whom are still around (and so can be consulted).

Later come the written narratives, the four gospels. If you haven't read their Easter stories, do it today – they take up less than five pages of the Bible (clue – they're at the end of each gospel) and they are haunting. And hard to pin down.

Say you want to believe that it happened just like it says – well, what did happen? How do you evaluate events in which someone who died is seen, can [pass through locked doors](#) but can also [eat fish](#)? Or say you're very sophisticated, and prefer to see all these stories as poetic, literary creations – what kind of experience would make people write like stories that, unlike anything else written at the time? For questioners and believers – and for people who are both – these stories disturb and fascinate. Today's is like part of a detective drama.

If you watch these programmes, you are used to spotting those stray moments that are anything but – a throwaway remark, something hastily slipped in a drawer. You file them away, because you know they are hints, clues which will become important as the plot unfolds. It's a clever thing to do, but you manage it without even noticing.

This hint dropping happens in John's gospel. In our reading, Peter and the disciples go fishing – go back to their old jobs BC, before they got caught up with Jesus. After a fruitless – fishless – night they see a stranger on the shore who directs them to a huge catch. They come ashore, realising now that the stranger is Jesus, raised from the dead, and he has breakfast ready, cooking on a fire – a charcoal fire. Why bother to tell us that? File it away.

For Peter, Easter is not a straightforwardly happy time. Imagine what VE Day, eighty years ago, would have felt like if you were ashamed of something you'd done earlier in the war. That is Peter's plight. He cannot meet Jesus, risen from death, without remembering how he let that death happen.

The last time we saw him before Jesus died was on Good Friday. In the [reading](#) from John's gospel he was outside the building where Jesus was on trial, warming himself at a fire. A charcoal fire, John tells us.

Round that first, nighttime fire, Peter was asked about Jesus three times. You're not one of Jesus' people, are you? Caught off guard, perhaps, he panicked – No, I'm not. Then he got a second chance – and a third – and he failed each time: No. No. No, I'm not.

Now, in the dawn, beside another, painfully familiar charcoal fire, three more questions, this time from the very person he denied. Do you love me? Caught off guard again, perhaps, he blurts out a Yes. Come on, think about it, think *back*: do you really love me? Yes. And then, the third time: Do you love me? Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.

Charcoal, such a subtle link; but what's the point? These two scenes together tell the story of real forgiveness. As political pros know, we live by stories. There are public stories we listen to, stories we tell about each other – and the ones we tell about ourselves.

If you're like me, you have a showreel in your head of times you have, say, proved trustworthy, done the right thing; and another reel of the times you didn't. Do you find yourself watching one more than the other? Neither on its own is the full story, but even if you run them together, the combined story may still feel shaming. What then will it mean to feel forgiveness?

'Forgive and forget' is not a grown-up option, you can't pretend the letting-down never happened. No – there needs to be a new story that can be told about you: a story that acknowledges what happened but sets you free from guilt; that offers not amnesia but amnesty*.

This story of breakfast by the lake shows what St Paul meant when he said that Jesus died for our sins. Easter will only work for Peter if he can be taken back, step by step by hurtful step, to that moment which sums up his failure. Only then can he know the forgiveness Jesus wants to give him.

Peter's defining story has become the one about the fire in the darkness: the champion follower of Jesus who threw in the towel before a punch was landed. That's what has made him go back to his boat – to try to forget? – back to his old life story.

Now, by the dawn fire, Jesus takes him back to that night, so Peter can say, and say and say again: No, I don't want this to be the story that sticks, the defining narrative about me; you know that I love you.

And Jesus tells him, tells him and tells him again what will be his new story: feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. Peter the failed disciple will not go back to being a fisherman; he will go on to be a shepherd, looking after Jesus' flock. (Wonderful to be thinking about this as the cardinals in Rome prepare to choose Peter's successor.)

Finding that new story can be hard.

Organisations – including political parties – try to create new stories for themselves, but we are good at conning ourselves, and the story that sticks can't be one you just tell yourself; it has to be a story that you *hear*. You need to hear it from someone who knows you, knows it all, and hasn't given up on you.

Such a person won't just speak for themselves but for God. In fact, if you and I open my hearts to prayer, we may begin to hear that new story direct, from the One to whom Peter says, 'Lord, you know everything'.

It can be hard to believe that God knows you and me through and through and doesn't give up on us. We need to be reminded of it in the head and in the guts. That is why God does not just tell us this, but comes among us as our own flesh and blood in Jesus. And that is why we have this service each week, because here, Sunday by Sunday – just like on the beach in Galilee, just like on the night he was betrayed and denied – Jesus breaks bread with the people who have let him down.

And he says to us, as to them, You are free. Free to start again, to try again, probably to fail again, perhaps to fail better, but you are free. Now follow me.

Note

**Not amnesia but amnesty* Not my phrase. I am indebted for it and for my closing remarks to Francis Spufford's [Unapologetic](#), Faber and Faber, 2012, page 166. The author introduces his book [here](#).