

It's about 50 years after the incident happened and the writer of the Gospel of John is telling about the third and last encounter with the risen Christ that he will record. 50 years later and he know how many fish they caught that day – really? Of course, on a practical side, fishermen would generally count their catch of fish before taking them to the market but I doubt they said that day, “Oh, Look, its Jesus. Let go talk with him but first let's count fish.” Probably not.

And then, this is **John's gospel** where carefully crafted symbols carry layers of meaning. So what does 153 mean? Cyril of Alexandria in the 5th century said that the 100 represented the fullness of the gentiles, the 50 symbolized the remnant of Israel and the three of course was there for the Trinity. St Augustine's theory was a little more complicated. He said, there are 10 commandments and 7 is the perfect number of fullness or perfection and that's 17 right? Now if you add all the numbers from 1 to 17 together, you know $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$ all the way up to 17 you'll get 153. And not only that but if you were to arrange them with 17 fish in the first row, and 16 in the next row, and 15 in the next row, all the way down to a row of 1 you get a perfect triangle which of course symbolizes the Trinity. St Jerome, who also lived in the 5th century, suggested that there were 153 different types of fish in the sea and it was symbolic of the church reaching all the people in the world – simpler but I don't know how many average people believed there were only 153 types of fish. I think the simplest and most likely explanation is that the Romans divided the known world into 153 districts.

And the catch of fish was a challenge to go out into the whole world instead of just going fishing. And why did they go fishing?

My guess is that they were broke. You can only hang out in the city for so long without any donations coming in then you have to go back to work. And it's possible that this whole story is about being clear about what their real work will be. And **fish** give us another clue.

Fish come in an amazing variety of shapes, sizes and colors, and they move so gracefully through the water. Watching them can be soothing or entertaining. They can be eaten in any setting, from around a campfire to the finest restaurants. Maybe that's why, in today's gospel passage, the words that really stand out are Jesus' first words to the disciples: "**Children, you have no fish, have you?**" Such sad words. After trying all night, the disciples still have no fish. They can't even make a decent meal. In the ancient Middle East, for a meal to be considered complete, you had to have bread and fish. Fish weren't just part of a heart-healthy diet, fish were essential. No decent host would let even his guest's slaves go without fish; to do that was to treat them as less than human, and risk being thought of as a poor host. So, without fish the disciples weren't even human beings. No fish. A whole night's work, and nothing to show for it. Just an empty boat. But the stranger on the shore can provide what is essential; with a word they are overwhelmed with fish. With a word they recognize it is the lord and just maybe realize that witnessing to him is what is truly essential.

So now they come ashore and they find a **charcoal fire** – another one of John's subtle clues.

There is only one other mention of a charcoal fire in John's gospel. On that cold night when Jesus is being questioned before his execution, Peter stands outside by a **charcoal fire** warming himself. For both Peter and for us the charcoal fire brings a flashback to the terrible night that Peter betrayed his lord three times.

Peter already knows that the Lord forgives him, but Peter hasn't forgiven himself and, as long as he focuses on his guilt, he can't focus on his mission. Our Lord posed the question three times to Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" But what are "these"? To love Jesus Christ "more than these" must have a referent. Who or what are "these"? When Jesus predicted that all the disciples would fail him and fall away, Peter responded with brash self-confidence, "I will never betray you!" It was as if Peter was saying, "Jesus, you may be right about all these other guys, but I am not like them. I am different, special, a deeper, more committed disciple than they are." This side of Peter's awful three-fold denial, Jesus may be pushing Peter to confess and admit just how very much like his brothers and sisters he really is.

Others speculate that with the disciples just beyond earshot, Jesus may be asking Peter, "Do you love me more than you love these guys who are your friends?" Near eastern culture, particularly among males, values and celebrates friendship. These men had become very close to each other as they followed Jesus. With our Lord now preparing to return to the Father, it would make sense that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him more than he loves his friends.

A third interpretation is similar: “Simon, do you love me more than these things?” What things? Do you love me more than the fishing boats, the nets, and the familiar shore of the Sea of Galilee? Jesus was asking Peter if he loved him more than the cozy, comfortable, predictable lifestyle he had known all his life. Was he willing to risk the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable?

Or maybe something bigger is going on here. John clearly loves symbolism and THREE was always the indicator that God was doing something in a situation. Maybe John was most interested in concluding his gospel with a reminder to all of us about how God operates. **HE asks us to love him and when we claim we do, then he asks us to do something about it.**

Oscar Hammerstein wrote lots of music for Broadway, I think this line might be from South Pacific but it goes: *A bell's not a bell until you ring it. A song's not a song until you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away.*

I can hear Jesus' words to Peter in that: Peter do you love me? Feed my sheep. Jesus was saying, Peter you know the song. Sing it! Peter you've got the bell. Ring it! "Peter, love isn't love till you give it away."