

Third Sunday of Easter C - Do you love me? If you do, then Feed my sheep!

May 1, 2022.

This Sunday's gospel reading from John (21:1-19) tells us of the conversion that brought the difference the Lord's Resurrection makes in the disciples' lives, with focus on Peter, destined to become the fearless leader of the Twelve in spite of his failing so miserably and denying his Lord three times. Jesus revealed to Peter that Satan had asked for permission to sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31). Jesus could have easily protected Peter but he had a higher goal. He was equipping Peter to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:32), becoming the pillar of the early church in Jerusalem, exhorting and training others to follow the Lord Jesus (Acts 2). Peter continues to strengthen us through his epistles, 1 and 2 Peter. As with all our failures, God used Peter's many failures, including his three denials of Christ, to turn him from Simon, a common man with a common name, into Peter, the Rock. We see how well this new trust in the Risen Lord sustains Peter as he faces the Sanhedrin, the very body which he had felt intimidated when he betrayed his Master. Unafraid of them now, he has 'filled Jerusalem' with his teaching. Now he sees his life, shaped by the Lord's call, as 'obedience to God – whatever it may cost. He gives his fearless witness to the God of Israel as the one who raised Jesus 'the leader and saviour – confident that he is supported by 'the Holy Spirit given to those who obey him'; and he calls those who unjustly put Jesus to death to 'repentance and the forgiveness of sins'. Now the lessons of the Risen Lord, given on the evening of his resurrection day, have become the charter of his life.

The disciples have already been in the presence of the Risen Lord more than once. In John chapter 21, John recorded the fourth and final appearance after some time has passed. The disciples have now left Jerusalem and returned to the safety of their home in Galilee and away from those terrible forces that Jesus confronted in the city. Jesus' loyal followers are home, but they don't quite know what to do with themselves or what to make of those strange appearances that happened just after Jesus' death. Peter decides to go fishing, and several of the others decide to go with him. They don't have any luck, but the next morning, as they are coming back to shore, they find a man standing there who tells them to cast the net again, to the right side of the boat this time — and of course, the man is Jesus, and of course, they haul in so many fish that the net is nearly torn. And Jesus invites them to sit down on the beach, around the fire he has made, to break bread with him once more: from the last supper to the first breakfast. As I said before, it is the last appearance of the risen Jesus that John records. But this is not Jesus' last appearance. Look with the eyes of faith, and we begin to see Jesus in the oddest places: on the seashore, in the garden, on the street corner. Sometimes Jesus is hungry and cold and asking us for money. And other times he is inviting us to sit down for an unexpected meal. But always, always, **Jesus is challenging us to live lives of kindness and compassion, of sharing and generosity, of justice-making and peace. The abundant life that Jesus has brought us is a life of love: it comes from love and is intended to bring more love into the world.**

The English language has a poverty of words for love. We have to modify love with other words if we want to try and be precise about what we're talking about: we talk about "romantic" love, "familial" love, "brotherly" love, and so on. Greek does a better job of this, as we can see in the conversation that Jesus has with Peter after they finish breakfast. Jesus asks Peter, "**Do you love me?**" And Peter answers him, "**Well Lord, of course, you know I love you.**" But Jesus doesn't seem to be satisfied with this answer, so he asks Peter again, and Peter again gives the same answer. In fact, this exchange happens three times. Now brothers and sisters, you may wonder why would Jesus ask Peter this question three times? It turns out, **in the original Greek, Jesus and Peter are using completely different words for love. What Jesus actually asks Peter is: do you agape me? And Peter answers: yes Lord, you know that I philia you.** Between agape and philia. Jesus wants agape: the kind of love that is life-transforming, wholly

consuming, that means commitment beyond feelings. **Agape is the self-giving love that sacrifices its own needs for the good of others. The kind of love that God has for us. This is the love Jesus showed us on the cross, and Jesus is asking for this kind of love in return.** But all Peter can offer is philia: I have affection for you, Lord. I like you. That's what **philia is — more like, than love.** We shouldn't be too hard on Peter though. Perhaps he was just trying to be honest about the kind of love he was capable of giving Jesus in return. Peter saw Jesus' brutal execution with his own eyes, so he is well aware of what can result from too much agape love. **Letting go of yourself for the good of the other is not an easy calling.**

A remarkable and beautiful thing happens at the end of this exchange though: after the first two times of Jesus' asking and Peter's answering, at the third time Jesus finally gets what he wants from Peter because he uses philia instead of agape to ask Peter, the same word for love that Peter had been using all along. Peter is hurt, perhaps because he feels embarrassed by Jesus' lowered expectations. But in reality, he has no need for embarrassment: the point is that Jesus loves us enough to meet us where we are. **If all we can offer is philia, then Jesus will meet us there, and keep walking with us. Jesus knows that the agape love with which God holds together the universe is more than enough to go around: it can make up for our deficiencies in love. And as we walk with Jesus and our hearts grow more open, God's agape love will come pouring in, until we are so full that it begins to flow through us and out into the world. This is the abundant life that Jesus wants for us: will we follow him into it?**

In response to Peter's three-fold declaration of love for Jesus, each time Jesus said, "Feed my sheep". After preparing a breakfast of fish and bread for his disciples, Jesus then commissioned Peter with the task of feeding His sheep and tending His lambs. The three commands, although often translated the same way in English, are subtly different. The first time Jesus says it, it means literally **"pasture (tend) the lambs"** in Greek (v. 15). The Greek word for "pasture" is in the present tense, denoting a continual action of tending, feeding and caring for animals. Throughout Scripture believers are referred to as sheep. **"For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care"** (Psalm 95:7). **Jesus is both our Good Shepherd (John 10:11) and the Door of the sheepfold (John 10:9).** By describing His people as lambs, He is emphasizing their nature as immature and vulnerable and in need of tending and care. The second time, the literal meaning is **"tend My sheep"** (v. 16). In this exchange, Jesus was emphasizing tending the sheep in a supervisory capacity, not only feeding but ruling over them. This expresses the full scope of pastoral oversight, both in Peter's future and in all those who would follow him in pastoral ministry. **Peter follows Jesus' example and repeats this same Greek word *poimaino* in his first pastoral letter to the elders of the churches of Asia Minor: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers"** (1 Peter 5:2). The third time, the literal translation is **"pasture (tend) the sheep"** (v. 17). Here **Jesus combines the different Greek words to make clear the job of the shepherd of the flock of God. They are to tend, care for, and provide spiritual food for God's people, from the youngest lambs to the full-grown sheep, in continual action to nourish and care for their souls, bringing them into the fullness of spiritual maturity. The totality of the task set before Peter, and all shepherds, is made clear by Jesus' three-fold command and the words He chooses.** The challenge Christ presented to Peter is the same challenge facing us. We are to plunge into the waters of life and risk everything for the sake of the Lord. We, the church, will gather into one unbroken net, men and women of every race, colour and nationality so as to be one of living service for the glory of our God: Feed my Sheep, spread the Good News and proclaim the Good Words to the world. Amen