

Reflection for 3rd Sunday of Easter by Rev'd Peter Shaw

At some time or another, most of us have been in the situation where we think we have safely set the course of our lives. But then something unexpected happens to cut right across our neat plans; loss of employment, a sudden illness or injury, the loss of a loved one.

We are forced to rethink our life and where we are going;

In whatever way the change has been forced upon us, the result is often devastating, striking at the core of our being, perhaps leading us to question who we are and what our life is all about. In some circumstances we may have feelings of guilt, failure and worthlessness. How can we face up to life? Can we ever begin again? Will it be possible to rebuild what is now broken?

This was most likely Peter's state of mind when he said to a group of disciples, "I'm going out to fish" (Jn 21.3).

Only seven of the eleven disciples were there. They were all confused.

Three and a half years ago Jesus had called them to follow him. These were amazing years. They had heard his teaching, witnessed his miracles, observed his prayer life; there had been a certain security about it - Jesus was there as their home base

To the four fishermen among them, Jesus had said, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt. 4.19).

I wonder if, during that time, they ever had that nagging feeling, "One day, Jesus is really going to get us to do this."

But Jesus teaching had led to bitter opposition from the Jewish leaders - had led to his brutal execution on a Roman cross. Had their "fishing for men" led only to this? - only to the Cross?

Now they had seen Jesus alive - Mary Magdalene had seen him! Ten of the disciples had themselves seen him, while they met in secret behind closed doors. He had said to them, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then we are told in John 20, He had breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (Jn 20.19-23).

Thomas was not there that evening. A week later the whole eleven of them were together - Thomas too. Jesus appeared to them again (vv. 24-29).

But what did it all mean for them – and us?

They were forced to re-evaluate, not only their thoughts about who Jesus was and what he had come to do, but their whole lives. What had Jesus meant when he had called them to follow him? They had certainly followed him, had watched and listened, had learnt a great deal, but then - in Gethsemane - they faltered!

Yet the risen Lord Jesus had now said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you"! The risen Jesus still had expectations of them!

For a professional like Peter to say "Who would like to go fishing?" it meant something quite different from the same words on the lips of an amateur. He was on the brink of a decision - would this be a casual outing, or a return to his old lifestyle? His brother Andrew wasn't there and they had three non-professionals on board too. Peter seems to be evaluating his life – what was it to be, fishing? - **or fishing for men?**

In my work with fishermen, I learnt that there are times of good catches - and none. But they are making a living; there is some sort of a catch - every time!

But this time, they hadn't caught a thing.

I wonder what their thoughts were; what's the matter? Have I lost my touch? Have I lost the edge I had against the other professional fishermen? Has following Jesus made me worse, not better off? I'm trapped! I can't go back, **but - how can I go forward?**

Then as the sun begins to rise they see someone at the water's edge looking out towards them. Some jogger? - we might have thought. It could have been anyone really. And then he guides them to a large catch of fish - later they counted a hundred and fifty-three big fish.

John recalls an earlier occasion and says, "It is the Lord!" Peter jumps in, swims ashore then helps the others bring in the fish. Jesus is preparing breakfast for them!

Peter really wanted to be with Jesus. But - whatever could he say to Jesus, and what might Jesus say to him?

Jesus didn't say to Peter, "I'm ashamed of you, Peter! Why didn't you stay by me, like you said? I'll never trust you again!" Nor did he say, "I told you so! I knew you wouldn't keep by your promise!" In some ways Peter might have expected those kinds of words from the Lord. Rebuke and dismissal might have seemed easier to take!

But instead, Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" - behind these words lie all of Peter's professions of loyalty. Matthew records Peter's words like this, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (26.33). And now it's as if Jesus is saying, "Remember your words Peter? Is your love really greater than the others?" Peter says nothing about the comparison, but insists, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

There is a point of contrast in the Greek original that doesn't come across clearly into English. We use our word "love" to mean so many different things. It translates into at least three distinct Greek words - two of which are in the passage we just heard. One of them, *agape*-love, is the subject of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians chapter 13 and is a strong word which speaks of commitment. The other, *philia*, isn't so strong and refers to friendship or fondness.

Let's separate them out a bit further as "love" and "fondness" so that we can really catch the feel of this passage.

Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, do you love me more than the others?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord," but uses the word for fondness "you know that I am fond of you." He doesn't use the strong word for "love" - "agape" - to describe his feelings towards the Lord.

Then Jesus says, "Simon, do you love me?" and Peter replies again, "Yes, Lord, you know that I am fond of you."

In Verse 17 - the third time Jesus says to him, "Simon son of John, are you fond of me?" Notice that Jesus uses the same word as Peter's reply. Peter is hurt it's the third question, reminiscent of his three-times denial of his Lord, Peter is grief-stricken because the third question is different - Jesus has noticed.

Jesus understands that the old brashness is gone, that Peter can only claim fondness towards Him, not love. So Peter says, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I am fond of you."

Now comes the incredible part. Jesus could have said, "OK, Peter. So you have failed me. You sincerely wanted to love me with a commitment that was prepared even to die for me. But you didn't make it. I can see that you are remorseful, and I'm glad to have you as one of my friends. But - sorry! I'll never trust you again! The work still to be done is so important that it wouldn't be fair to you, to me or to anyone!"

But it wasn't like that at all!

Back in the upper room Luke records that, before Peter had made his great profession of allegiance, Jesus made this prediction, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you all as wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Lk.22.31,32).

And here we have Jesus talking to the same Simon Peter - after he has denied his Lord three times. Simon Peter has genuine friendship - "philia" - towards Jesus but not yet the deep commitment of love - "agape". The disciple who has been sifted as wheat, whose self-confidence has faltered, whose faith in himself has been shattered.

"Simon," Jesus is saying to him, "Feed my lambs!" Did you hear that? Feed my lambs! Simon, I called you long ago to leave those fishing nets because I have work for you to do - and I haven't given up on you! I still have work for you to do. Feed my lambs! Watch out for my little ones. They are precious to my heavenly Father - be sure to feed them!

"Take care of my sheep!" Remember, Simon, what I said about my sheep, the people who believe in me. I came so that they might have life and have it to the full (Jn 10.10). As the good shepherd I have laid down my life for them. "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also..." (v.16). Simon, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep!

Then comes another prediction, for, though Simon Peter has denied his Lord, the time will come when he will give his life for his Lord after all, for Jesus says "But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God)".

The risen Lord Jesus is with us today, asking us that same question - "Do you love me?" Well, what about it? Do we?

Perhaps, like Peter, there was a time when we thought we could answer that sort of question with confidence, but now - well, we're not so sure...

For some it may be that we find ourselves responding to the questions that the media keep pushing at us, questioning the Christian faith, questioning the Gospel record, accusing Christians of all the problems in the world, objecting to the absolute claims of Jesus, casting doubt on the teachings and miracles of Jesus... So we keep a private faith - with some reservations – and perhaps guilt!

But here is Jesus saying, "Do you love me?"

How do we respond to him?

For some it may be that our doubts are about ourselves. Perhaps we have cracked under pressure - or fear a total commitment of our lives to our Lord. Our faith is not only private but secret – we are afraid to share it with others. We certainly want him to be our Saviour in eternity, but are hesitant about the implications of having him as Lord here and now... And here is Jesus saying, "Do you love me?" How do we respond to him?

Our immensely loving and compassionate Lord simply looks to see that we are sincerely turning to him, that we know that we aren't what we ought to be, that we acknowledge the reservations we have about him or rightly have about ourselves.

But still he says, "Feed my sheep!"

Can we handle that? Would we prefer it if Jesus were to say to us, "Look, I know all about you, I'm glad you're my friend. Keep coming along to church. You're welcome here. But don't do anything! Sorry - you don't qualify! But come - to show our friendship!"? Would we prefer that? Do you think that is what he is saying to us?

Well, he isn't! He's saying, "Feed my lambs! Care for my sheep! Feed my sheep!" He's calling us to service - not only by coming, but in truly sacrificial giving, not only in faithful weekly worship but in daily living, in everything we do, in every part of our lives.

"Do you love me? Then feed my lambs! Care for my sheep! Feed my sheep!"

AMEN