



John 21:15–19

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’

‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ 16 Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ 17 The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you

love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.’

Reflection

The sun is rising over the sea of Tiberias in Galilee, some eighty miles north of Jerusalem. This is familiar territory for Jesus’ disciples, many of them had grown up in this region, and most of Jesus’ ministry had occurred in Galilee. It may even be from this very location that Peter and Andrew, James and John were first called by Jesus to follow him.

The disciples are sitting around a charcoal fire eating breakfast. A huge net, filled to

breaking point, fish still flapping, lies forgotten on the shore, not far from their hastily moored fishing boat.

The seven disciples, Peter still dripping wet, are having breakfast with Jesus. John 21:12 suggests that there was little conversation. Most likely they were still trying to process what had just occurred: the miraculous catch; Peter diving off the boat and swimming to shore; and Jesus, back from the dead, appearing to them again, not walking through walls this time, instead, making them breakfast after filling their nets with 153 large fish after they hadn't managed to catch a single one. And of course, the location and this miracle, had brought flooding back memories of when Jesus had first miraculously filled their nets, called them to be his disciples,

and promised that they would become 'fishers of men'.

But amidst this awkward silence another thought dominates, especially for Peter, shivering and leaning into that charcoal fire. It's smell no doubt is taking him back to another charcoal fire that he'd huddled around well past midnight on that cold April evening in the high priest's compound. Only it is not palace guards stoking the fire this time, but Jesus. Two charcoal fires (John 18:18; 21:9), John's incidental historical recollection, for the attentive reader and for Peter ties these two scenes together. The disciples feel it and Peter feels it, barely able to make eye contact with Jesus. In chapter 13 Peter had vowed to follow Jesus anywhere: to trial, to prison, to death. Then in chapter 18 we

watched on helplessly as Peter tried and failed. Three times he lied. Three times he denied even knowing Jesus. While Jesus was protecting his disciples, deflecting the authorities' questions away from them and to himself, Peter, just outside had denied even knowing Jesus three times. And then the rooster had crowed. Oh the agony of that moment when, with echoes of the rooster's cry still ringing in the air, Jesus had turned and stared directly at Peter (Luke 22:61). Peter had wept bitterly, but his tears could not wash this image from his mind, and it hung heavily in the air around this second charcoal fire, a huge barrier in Peter's relationship with Jesus. It is into this moment that today's passage speaks, reading from John 21:15–19,

15 When they had finished eat-

ing, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ 16 Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ 17 The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.

Peter has been forgiven, but he is yet to heal. And just like a surgeon, in today’s passage, Jesus opens up the wound so

that he can apply the salve of the gospel and heal it forever. Mercifully, it seems from verse 20 in tomorrow's passage that Jesus takes Peter away from the others. They're probably walking along the shoreline. Verse 15,

‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’

Jesus opens up the wound. He goes where the pain is. Not ‘Peter’ (which means ‘rock’, the new name that Jesus had given him), but ‘Simon’, the rock who had failed to live up to his name. And then the heartbreaking question with a barb at the end,

‘Do you love me more than these?’

‘Simon, you said you'd follow me any-

where. You said that even if all the others deserted me that you would stay strong.'

'Do you love me more than these?'

John doesn't describe Peter's reaction, but from our own experience we can well imagine. As Jesus singles him out, the other disciples watching on, we can imagine Peter's heart beginning to race, his mouth instantly dry, his stomach churning. We feel his shame and hurt at Jesus' words. We imagine his cheeks burning red and his eyes fighting back tears.

'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.'

There is a glimmer of hope in Jesus' reply, perhaps things could be as they were,

‘Feed my lambs.’

But then Jesus asks him again,

‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ ‘Take care of my sheep.’

And then a third time, not ‘Peter’ again, but,

‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’

This almost proves too much for Peter. He’s hurt. We read as much in verse 17,

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked

him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.

Three denials; three times Jesus confirms Peter's love. And three times Jesus re-affirms Peter's role as his disciple. Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.

'Yes, you failed Peter. But that's okay, because this is done in my strength and not yours. You failed but I did not fail. And as long as you love me everything is going to be okay. Just as with these fish; I will provide. Through me, and only through me, in my strength and not your own, will you become a 'fisher of men'. On this rock, Peter, my church will be built – but it is I who

will build my church. For your part, all that is essential is that you love me, and in response, obey my commandments.'

'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.'

Think & Pray

Today's passage is one of those beautiful, memorable and foundational passages of Scripture. As is so common in the Scripture we see one of the Bible's greatest leaders, graciously forgiven and used by God despite his failure. Because the Bible is not about vaunting personalities or great human achievement; it is about real people and grace. All fall short, even

the rock on which Jesus would go on to build his church, but that's okay. Because Jesus has done it for us, and we can now do all things through him.

This passage also reinforces for us our greatest priority as Christians; something even Peter needs to be reminded of, and a fitting way for John to end his gospel about Jesus Christ. Jesus called this the greatest commandment. Kent Hughes describes it in this way,

The greatest priority of life is the nature and primacy of our love for God ... The abiding principle before all things, even service to him, we must love him with all our hearts. It is the first question for every theologian. It is the supreme question for every missionary. It is the

number one question for every one of us who wants to please God. Loving God is the highest priority of our lives.

Imagine that Jesus is speaking directly to you in this morning's passage. 'Do you love me?' he asks. How do you respond? Are you growing in your love of Jesus? Are you praying to him more, delighting more in his word, in his community, in the changes he has made in your life? Are you speaking about him more than ever? Are you caring for his sheep? Perhaps you've been forgiven but are yet to be healed. How is Jesus speaking to you through his words today?

Consider these questions deeply in this time of reflection, because, in the end, there is very little more important in life

than growing in our love and obedience of God. Then close in prayer, delighting in every moment spent in conversation your Father.