

JOHN 21:1-19
ST JAMES'; 10.4.16; 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

Think for a moment about any experience you've had when you've let someone down badly, and instead of condemning you, they've been willing to forgive you, and to continue trusting you

Not long before the events in today's passage, Peter's courage and faith had publicly failed him in the courtyard at the High Priest's house; here we read about the way in which the Lord publicly restores Peter, and commissions him for the ministry he'll exercise until the day when he will die and *glorify God* (v 19). But before we think about the way in which Jesus deals with Peter's failings here, let's put it in context by looking at some of his dealings with Peter up to this point.

PETER UP TO THIS POINT

We don't really know when Peter first became aware of Jesus, but Matthew, Mark and Luke do tell us about the time when Jesus first called Peter to be his disciple. Luke tells the story in most detail in chapter 5 of his gospel:

Jesus found Peter and his colleagues cleaning their nets. He asked them to let him use one of their boats as a pulpit. Once he'd finished preaching, Jesus said to Peter, *Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch* (Luke 5:4). Peter told him that they'd caught nothing all night, but even so, they let down their nets and *they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break!* (Luke 5:6).

Does it sound familiar?! But Peter's response to Jesus was very different – on that occasion, we read, *he fell on his knees before Jesus and said, Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!* (Luke 5:8).

Whereas, by the time of the incident we're thinking about today, Peter can't get to Jesus quickly enough!

Peter was one of those people who go very quickly from one extreme to the other; when he got things right, he was spot on, but when he got things wrong, he was way off-beam. For example, at Caesarea Philippi, when Peter was spot on as he identified Jesus: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matthew 16:16). But only a few verses later, Peter was way off-beam when he refused to accept that Jesus would be put to death (Matthew 16:22).

Let's fast forward to the night of the Last Supper. While Jesus and the disciples were still in the Upper Room, Jesus made his first prediction that Peter would eventually die as a martyr: *Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later* (John 13:36). Putting all the gospel accounts together, we get a picture of Peter, full of his own loyalty and courage, protesting that he was ready to die for Jesus then and there (cf John 13:37; Mark 14:2). Later that night, in the garden of Gethsemane, Peter demonstrated his practical courage, as well as his hot temper and foolishness. When the arresting party arrived to collect Jesus, it was Peter who drew his sword and cut off Malchus' ear (John 18:10).

Peter still didn't really understand what was going on. He'd come to the realisation that Jesus was the Messiah, but despite all Jesus' teaching, he still hadn't grasped that Jesus was walking into the trap with his eyes wide open. Peter was impetuous and hot-headed. He wanted to fight; he was ready and willing to lay down his life in battle. When Jesus refused to fight, he must have been bewildered. I can imagine him following in a daze behind the arresting party, not quite believing what was happening, not able to understand why Jesus had allowed it to happen, wondering how things could be going so horribly wrong. Whatever his state of mind that night, it caused him to do just as Jesus had predicted (John 13:38), and to deny three times that he knew Jesus at all. So much for his boasts of loyalty, courage and readiness to die for Jesus! The thought of dying gloriously in battle was one thing; the thought of dying slowly, painfully and with absolutely no dignity, nailed to a cross, was another thing altogether.

It didn't take long for Peter to repent of his cowardice. As soon as that cock crowed, Peter *went outside and wept bitterly* (Matthew 26:75). It must have been a horrendous time for him; bad enough to witness Jesus' crucifixion, but with the added burden of his own betrayal hanging over him, Peter must have been in a very bad way over the next couple of days. But Jesus took pity on him. One of the very early resurrection appearances was to Peter alone (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). We don't know any of the details, but we can imagine that at the very least, Jesus assured Peter that he was forgiven, and reminded him that having returned, he was to strengthen

the other disciples. If Peter hadn't had this first private meeting with his risen Lord, he'd hardly have been in such a hurry to see him when Jesus appeared on the bank of the Sea of Galilee in the early morning.

PETER AND JESUS

Let's come back now to the story we heard this morning from John's gospel. On this occasion Peter can't get to Jesus quickly enough! It's not because he no longer thinks of himself as a sinful man, but rather because he's all too aware of his own sin and weakness. He knows that he needs Jesus to forgive him for his denials. By now, he knows Jesus well enough to understand that Jesus welcomes sinners. And maybe he's beginning to grasp that Jesus' death was the ultimate sin offering, and that his resurrection shows that he's far from being defeated.

One of the reasons people don't want to accept Jesus today is that they can't even accept that they are sinful, that they need a saviour. Our instinct in our human state is to keep Jesus away. What about you, today? Are you keeping Jesus away, so that you don't have to change? Or are you rushing to meet him, like Peter, knowing that you desperately need his love and forgiveness?

Peter may have already received Jesus' assurance of forgiveness in their private meeting. But he denied Jesus in a very public way. He's always been a sort of unofficial leader amongst the twelve, but since he's failed to live up to his boasting, and been as cowardly as the rest of them when Jesus was arrested, it's important that the other disciples (or at least some of them) witness Jesus restoring Peter. Peter denied

Jesus three times. Now, in front of the other six, he has to declare his love for Jesus three times. They also hear Jesus commission Peter three times to care for Jesus' *lambs* or *sheep*.

One thing which Peter showed consistently before the crucifixion, is that he didn't want a crucified Lord. At Caesarea Philippi, he refused to accept that Jesus would be put to death; when Jesus was arrested, Peter drew his sword. Peter couldn't cope with the idea of Jesus being executed. But Jesus was crucified. He's not what Peter wanted him to be. And so Jesus asks him: *Do you love me?* I'm not what you wanted me to be, I am crucified and risen – do you love me?

Again, what about you? Do you love Jesus as he is? Or have you 'reconstructed' him in your own image? Are there parts of the gospel stories which you just can't cope with, which you wish weren't there, because they disturb the picture of Jesus you want to hold on to? Jesus challenges each of us, just as he challenged Peter, *Do you love me?* If you don't love Jesus, the way he is, then you can't serve him. Love is the basic qualification for Christian service.

Peter has learned not to boast that he loves Jesus more than anyone else! In his answers to Jesus' question, he also relies on Jesus' knowledge of him, rather than on any merits of his own. He knows that his actions haven't been those of a loving disciple and friend. But he also knows that Jesus knows him better than he knows himself, and so each time Jesus asks him, *Do you love me?* Peter replies, *You know that I love you.*

In response, Jesus commissions Peter to pastoral care of Jesus' flock. About 30 years later, Peter wrote a letter which helps us to see how he carried out his Lord's commission. Later today, I suggest you get out your Bible, read 1 Peter 5, and reflect on Peter's 30 years of faithful ministry.

But there's one more thing which Jesus says to Peter on the shores of Lake Galilee. To Jesus' words in v 18, John adds the comment: *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God* (v 19). Jesus has already predicted Peter's martyrdom once, in the Upper Room. Now he reiterates that prediction. And he adds to it the command, *Follow me!*

PETER'S MINISTRY THEREAFTER

So we know that Peter lived for another 30 years, fulfilling the commission, and obeying the command given to him on the shores of Lake Galilee that morning. All through those 30 years of tending Christ's flock, and following him, Peter knew that eventually he'd lose his life as a martyr. It happened eventually, in Rome, probably under the Emperor Nero. Tradition says he was crucified upside down, because he didn't consider himself worthy of dying the same way as Jesus.

CONCLUSION

We're not all called to pastoral ministry, as Peter was. But we're all called to use the gifts God has given us (cf 1 Peter 4:10). And we're all called to love the Lord, and to follow him.

Peter knew where Jesus would lead him, and yet he still followed, serving Jesus' flock faithfully for 30 years, and then dying a martyr's death. Fortunately for most of us, we don't know the details of where following Jesus will lead us. It could lead to martyrdom; it will almost certainly lead to years of service, using our own gifts to build up the Lord's church. Beyond that, the details of our own personal calling are between each of us and the Lord. But hear again the Lord's words to each one of us here this morning: *do you love me? Follow me!*