

Do you love me?

[Acts 9.1-6](#)

[Revelation 5.6-14](#)

[John 21.1-19](#)

'Do you love me?' Do you really love me? How often we wonder this when we have been hurt by someone! And what is the implied question, the one that we may debate within ourselves, when someone has let us down or hurt us?

But how could he/she/you have done that if you love me?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus voices this question to Peter. *'Do you love me?'* Three times! Jesus knows his friend Peter so well, this brave impetuous friend who had promised to stay a faithful follower regardless of what might happen. Jesus knows that Peter let him down, denying him those three times on the night of his trial. He's very aware that Peter has felt the burden of his failure.

The weight of not having been the true friend at the time of Jesus' greatest need has been a great burden of shame. Jesus knows that it's not healthy to be held back by the failures of our past. And Peter has a big job ahead of him – he's to become a great leader of the people, one who will care for their needs and encourage them to grow through difficult times. But Jesus also knows that if Peter does not leave behind this burden, it will follow him, pulling him down and, rather than being strengthened to take up this leadership role, Peter will constantly question his ability to manage the difficult moments that he will certainly face in his ministry.

These post-resurrection stories focus on God bringing about the changes within the disciples so that they are able to take on their new roles as apostles. We can learn a lot from them because Jesus still offers to help us grow in Christian maturity and into the roles we could take - if only we are prepared to step out in faith.

I have found that Jesus deals kindly and gently with our weaknesses rather than being harsh and punitive. Last week we thought about Thomas and how Jesus dealt kindly with him, showing him his wounds but not berating him for his unbelief. I know of a quite intimate line drawing of Jesus taking the doubtful Thomas away from the others and gently pointing out his wounds. This is quite different from many other artists who have drawn Jesus standing over Thomas pointing out the error of his ways.

In that simple drawing, Jesus was affirming and kind, not rebuking or putting Thomas down. Jesus acts in the same gentle manner with us as we glimpse things we need to change. In my experience, we change gradually to become more like God intended us to be; more caring, able to listen more to God and people. This happens when we are prepared to bring these small glimpses to God and ask for the healing, patience, strength or whatever is necessary for us to be made whole.

And so it was with Peter. Jesus appears when the disciples have gone out fishing. Possibly this is an indication that they are not yet fully occupied as apostles - they have gone back to their old trade. It's been an unproductive night - no fish at all, so this unrecognised man on the shore tells them to put their nets out on the other side of the boat.

These seven disciples, the number of fulfilment can also be seen to symbolise the whole community of faith - the church universal, or all believers. Jesus calls the disciples 'children' – they are loved, but still have much to learn, just as all of us who encounter the risen Lord and seek to follow him. We too are loved by God, but we have much to learn.

We find ourselves at the beach where the disciples have just returned from a fishing expedition - a return to their pre-Jesus days. When the sun is just rising and the dawn of faith is just starting to break, the beloved disciple recognises that this stranger is Jesus and announces it to Peter.



Overcome with a desire to be with Jesus, Peter jumps overboard and swims ashore. Was he hopeful that Jesus hadn't noticed that he'd denied he even knew him? Was he reassured by the fact that Jesus had used a term of endearment "Children" and seemed to be welcoming? Eager as ever, Peter wants to be the first to talk with Jesus.

What they did discuss while the others were rowing ashore is not recorded. We do know that it did not address that huge 'elephant' in their relationship - how Peter had let Jesus down - because that comes later. That tells me again of Jesus' patience and gentleness when correcting us. He did not point out Peter's faults at the first opportunity; rather he gave Peter some space- and a cooked breakfast! In fact, this was the third time that Jesus had appeared to the disciples, so he was obviously choosing his time with Peter.

The disciples are involved in this meal too, just like in the feeding of the five thousand in John 6. This time, they share some of their freshly caught fish. Peter goes and hauls the net ashore. The same word is used here as in John 6:44 when the Father will draw people to himself and in John 12:32 when Jesus will draw others to himself when he is exalted on the cross.

As Jesus' followers, we are all encouraged to let down our nets into the sea of humanity, to fellowship with him as the disciples did when they ate their breakfast together and, in this context, we will grow in our love and faithfulness and will be effective as we draw others to God.

So here we are sitting around a charcoal fire- the last time one of these was mentioned was when Peter denied Jesus in the courtyard. Did the smell of the fire evoke this memory for Peter? Jesus takes Peter back to this time of failure, asking

'Do you love me more than these?'

Humbly Peter offers his love; he is no longer brashly confident as he has suffered from his failure.

The three times repetition *'Do you love me?'* and Peter's affirmative answer restores the relationship; it's painful for Peter, but necessary if he is to be transformed in the resurrection power of Jesus and enabled to take up the pastoral role that Jesus gives him.

When a relationship is damaged by denial or betrayal like Peter's, the bad feelings can often go both ways. We can feel shaken to the very core of our being.... either by our own failing or because of the hurt someone else inflicted. Being able to accept that we need to change can be hard. It can also be difficult to accept and support someone else's decision to act differently. But unless we do take steps along this path, these unresolved feelings can bounce up and bite us when we are least expecting it. They are often the cause of us feeling less than capable or up to a task that we know needs to be tackled. Similarly, if Peter hadn't resolved his shame over denying Jesus, I doubt he would have been transformed into the gentle leader that he became.

Of course, it's God who enables forgiveness and the restoration of right relationships. And God invites us into that growth process. We come with the trusting Easter faith that God longs to transform us and bring new life. We are encouraged to bring our hurts and failings knowing that Jesus treats us gently, just like he treated Thomas and Peter. That is what Easter is about: new life now, forgiveness of sins and the restoration of our relationships with God and others today. May each of us be prepared to come before Jesus humbly and let him gently transform us.