

A fresh start: John 21: 15-22

John chapter 21 is one of my favourite parts of the Bible.

Why do I love it? I think partly because it's such an evocative scene, appealing to all the senses. If you remember, it comes right at the end of John's Gospel after the Jesus has been crucified and the disciples have gone back to what they know and is familiar - fishing. And they have tried to catch fish and they haven't been successful and then a stranger on the shore (who turns out to be Jesus) says "*Throw your net over the other side!*" And they catch shedloads of fish and then Peter realises who it is, and the stranger on the shore cooks fish on a fire on the beach, and he invites them to come and eat breakfast.

We last heard of Peter when he was vehemently denying all knowledge of Jesus in the garden of the High Priest - and now here he is sitting with his beloved, resurrected Lord on a beach eating breakfast. And through the haze of the smoke and with the smell of cooking fish, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him '*Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?*'

It must have been the moment Peter was dreading, bringing all that stuff up again. He knew he'd messed up big style and, along with the absolute joy and delight of seeing Jesus alive, must also have come the fear of what he would say about 'That Thing'.

It's really interesting that Jesus uses Peter's old name. "*Simon, son of John*". When Jesus had invited him to be his disciple, way back when he'd given him a new name - Peter - The Rock - and had told him of his great expectations of him - "*on you this rock I will build my church*". But Peter probably wasn't feeling very rock-like at this moment when Jesus calls him by his old name - Simon.

It's a bit like Jesus is saying "*I have not done with you yet, Peter. There is unfinished business between us. Right, let's go back to basics. Let's start again. The past has to be faced, and revisited and redeemed. It can't just be ignored*".

They're sitting in front of a charcoal fire and it was beside a fire that Peter was warming himself when he vehemently denied even knowing Jesus. Jesus, who is sitting in front of him now as clear as day. And because he denied him three times, he asks him three times whether he loves him.

The fish are being grilled. And so is Peter.

It's interesting to look at the words used for love in the 3 questions and responses because they're not consistent throughout.

In the Greek of the New Testament, there are three words for love: eros, philia, and agape.

Eros usually refers to physical love.
Philia is brotherly love, and
Agape, generally known as divine love, is self-giving love.

Interestingly John, the writer of this Gospel was very careful in choosing words, and he uses these words for love in an interesting way.

Jesus uses the word agape when he asks Peter for the 1st and the 2nd time. Peter replies with philia all 3 times, but Jesus changes his question the third time.

So it goes like this:

Jesus : Simon son of John do you agape me more than the other disciples agape me?

Simon : Yes Lord, you know that I philia you.

Jesus: Simon son of John do you agape me ?

Simon : Yes Lord you know that I philia you.

Jesus : Simon son of John do you philia me ?

Simon: "Lord you know all things, you know that I philia you."

John doesn't give any reason to explain his choice, who we have to guess, but it could be something like this:

1. Jesus: "Do you love me in the way I love you with self-giving love?" (that's agape)

Peter: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you in the same way as I love my brother." (philia, this time)

2. Second time: "Do you love me in the way I love you (with agape, self-giving love)?"

Peter:

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you as my brother. (philia again)

3. Jesus : "OK, Do you love me in a way you love your brother?" (note the change to philia)

Peter: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you as my brother." (philia)

It's if Jesus is coming down to meet Peter at Peter's level of commitment. Perhaps Simon's wariness in using agape was because of his realisation of his own inadequacy after his threefold denial of Christ.

There's no doubt that Jesus wants us to love him in the way he loves us. But, like Peter we may find ourselves unable to respond with his kind of love, with agape, for a variety of reasons. We might feel worried that we're not ready to follow Jesus, because we seem only able to love him within our own limitations. Perhaps philia is all we can manage.

But, Jesus' calling and his love are not conditional. He will accept our love even though it is not as high, or as pure as agape. He accepted Peter's love at Peter's level of understanding. And he does the same with us too.

Three mistakes, three questions, three times a new commissioning, a new calling, a fresh start.

I love that the disciples are so human in the Gospels. I think if I'd been writing the story of Jesus and his followers I might have been tempted to airbrush out their mistakes, to make them a bit more shiny, a bit more impressive. But to do that would make the whole story a bit less believable. Because what we know oh so well is that we all make mistakes,

I wager a guess that there is not a person here who is not sitting now thinking of our own mistakes, our own failures, our own regrets. But the fantastic thing about following Jesus, and what this story shows us, is that failure is never the end. With Jesus, because his death on the cross and more especially because of his breaking free from the tomb, death, and sin and failure is never final.

It would have been very easy to see the cross as the final failure. Jesus's disciples must have thought *'Oh well, that's that then. Nice while it lasted. That's failure'*. But three days later they were proved very wrong. The resurrection of Christ shows us the God is in the business of turning around failure and giving the opportunity for a fresh start.

Today whatever your past holds, the most important question that Jesus is asking you - and me - is not

"What was that all about?", or
"What on earth were you thinking?", or
"Do you realise what you did?",
but "Do you love me?"

And like Peter he doesn't hold our past against us but commissions us to go and do great things for him.

And so here we are on the 1st of September - and I don't know if it's because it's because I've been in academic institutions for too long, but September always has a start of the year feeling for me - I believe the invitation to us is the same as invitation to Peter all those years ago. Don't ignore the past - we do need to face the mistakes we have made and reckon for them, but Jesus's invitation to each of us today is no matter what we have done, because of his cross and resurrection, we are called to follow him, to be his disciples.

Let's take a moment to picture Jesus asking us that question: Do you love me?

A prayer

Resurrected Lord:

We do love you, help our un-love!

Transform our lives from the-way-we-were
to your true image-bearers.

Commission us to your service
despite our poor catch records.

Thank you that you are not finished with us yet.

You are people of the Resurrection!

You know the powerful love of God!

Go into God's world proclaiming hope, peace, and joy, in the name of the Risen Lord.

AMEN.