

The Third Sunday of Easter, 4 May 2025

Readings: Acts 9.1-6 [7-20], Psalm 30, Revelation 5.11-14, John 21.1-19

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19.14)

Given today's readings at least three sermons will be in order... given the amount of material before us beginning with Jesus' resurrection encounter at the Sea of Galilee after a catch of fish as directed by Jesus, a breakfast prepared by Jesus and Peter's commissioning by a threefold questioning by Jesus as told by John, continuing with Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus, and concluding with a picture of all of creation worshipping the enthroned Lamb, Jesus who was slain, thereby "ransoming saints from every tribe and people and nation sitting on the throne". (5.9)

Welcome to my world! Welcome to your world! Welcome to our world! You and I inhabit various worlds. With Christians down the centuries we are all called to inhabit a biblical world as well and this biblical world has a beginning and an end. It places before us a vision underlining the worth of all creation, as well as each person being made in the image of God, the purpose of each and every person to know and love God and knowing and loving God to serve Him and worship Him assured of God's grace learning through the redeeming work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit to fix our hearts where true joys are to be found.

In Psalm 16 we read "Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." This verse is one we sang during the Easter Vigil in a darkened church with the Easter candle at the centre and each holding a lit taper. The source of the light was our Easter fire from which the Easter candle is lit and is then distributed to each and every one. Reminding us to take our light from the light of lights and the king of kings. And during this chapter of the liturgy we sing, 'In your presence is the fullness of joy. **In your presence is the fullness of joy.**' The author of the Book of Proverbs writes, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18) We are not perishing, but daily living in the reality that is Christ, crucified and risen for our sakes.

Today I want to cast an eye on Jesus pushing Peter by questioning him to the point of exasperation, who feeling hurt finally exclaims, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I

love you.’ Before proceeding let us for a moment envisage the scene. We are at the Sea of Galilee. It is late morning by now the disciples having been fishing first unsuccessfully and then under Jesus’ direction successfully catching a symbolic number of fish representing the known nations at the time from every tribe and people and nation. My favoured interpretation of the number 153. The universality of the message is fully grasped by the Apostles’ church and summed up memorably in the phrase ‘God so loved the world’ a love that does not condemn but rescues. (John 3.16,17) It is the universality of the message that holds today’s readings together. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles. John the seer doesn’t only see Israel around the throne, but as we have already stated twice he sees people from every tribe and people and nation. It is for this reason that it is an honour to serve in this congregation consisting of people from across the world.

Let us return to Sea of Galilee. Jesus has prepared a charcoal fire so that they he, Jesus and the disciples can enjoy breakfast together. Some of the disciples are named. These are Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others ...”. Only after enjoying breakfast with one another does Jesus turn to unfinished business and take forward what he inaugurates by commissioning Peter for the ministry of an Apostle and all who continue across the ages as members of the apostolic church as in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Timing is always important. How did the author of Ecclesiastes put it? “There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (3.7) Judging and knowing when to keep silence or to speak a great gift. Let’s however first eat breakfast together. Enjoy a meal together. Spend time together. But the meal comes to an end. There is unfinished business. There is work to be carried forward.

Three times Jesus asks Peter “Do you love me?” Each time Peter replies with a resounding “I love you.” Each time Jesus asks and Peter answers Peter is commissioned to accomplish something based on the imagery of the shepherd as captured in the Davidic psalm, Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd. **Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.** Jesus is making sure, make no mistake that the ministry being entrusted to Peter must be grounded in the love of Jesus with no ifs and buts and without hesitation. This commissioning, which carries with it undertones of restoration by the threefold questioning taking us back to

Peter's threefold denial during the Passion as it does, is a thorough searching of the heart. It is painful. It is painful to be honest with ourselves about past failure, connivance and denial. Only after this thorough and necessary searching of the heart and only then is Peter commissioned **to feed** the Lord's lambs. It is only then that Peter is commissioned **to tend** the Lord's sheep. It only then that Peter is commissioned **to feed** the Lord's sheep.

The other day I wrote a card to someone who is dear to many of us and ended it with love and affection. This little extra, this nuance is captured in the Greek. The first two times Jesus asks 'Do you love me' it corresponds to our notions of selfless love, sacrificial love, the last time he asks he is asking Peter, Do you not only love me but do you have affection for me. The love that God is searching out in Peter is a love that embraces gentleness, fondness, and genuine liking drawing us closer to him, Jesus who is close to the Father's heart. (John 1.18)

There is another nuance worth noting and that is the shift in the commissioning from lambs to sheep as in the last commissioning. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Puzzling at first until you remember that everyone loves the little lambs exclaiming often how cute and adorable they are. Our affections are to be stretched to not only care and tend that which we find adorable, likeable, or have an affinity to

Given the above we might have an inkling that Jesus is not shaming Peter by asking him three times if he loves him, but making sure Peter fully grasps the grave responsibilities being entrusted to him, being laid upon, the gravitas of his calling as captured in our ordination rites, which surely draw on this Gospel episode echoing into our today, the bishop saying,

"In the name of our Lord we bid you remember the greatness of the trust that is now to be committed to your charge. Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people.

You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Yes, we must each pray that our hearts be daily enlarged and our understanding of the Scriptures be enlightened, if we are to serve God.

At this time two historic Sees are vacant. The one is vitally important to the Church of England and the entire Anglican Communion, the See of Canterbury. The other is of vital importance to the Roman Catholic Church and Christians everywhere given the great reach and influence the Catholic Church has the world over and in the Church universal, the See of Rome. Both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion have a global membership folded into the one Christ for which we are immensely grateful. A global membership in both cases, but even more so in the Catholic Church, from every tribe and people and nation.

It is good that the Cardinals appointed in the main by Pope Francis soon meeting in conclave and about to elect the next Pope and those charged to name the next Archbishop to the Crown will today hear the same Gospel as we have. We are gathered around God's word. We inhabit together this biblical world an orientation for all. We trust and pray each will ponder their own calling keeping before them the imperatives of Gospel leadership and service, as we all must in our everyday lives as Christians: Feed my lambs. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep. May we examine our hearts by enduring the threefold questioning by Jesus, Do you love me. May our hearts by God's grace be enlarged if only a little this day and the next to feed and tend God's flock, both the lambs and the sheep and may we all do so with love and affection for our Lord God. **Amen.**