

A Sermon by Rev Francis Cumberlege
10th May 2020
Readings - Acts 9: 36-43; John 21: 1-19

Peter is so like many of us. I don't know whether you can identify with him easily, but at times I certainly can. Up in the air one moment – Simon bar Jonah you are a happy man, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father in heaven – what a moment! Then down in the depths – Get behind me Satan for you are a stumbling block to me. What could be worse?

When we meet up with Peter on this particular morning - he is at rock bottom. I imagine that his mind is going over the scene in that high priest's courtyard again and again - How the mighty had fallen. He was Peter - the one to whom Jesus had said - "Upon this rock I will build my church!" Some rock! he must have thought - drifting sand more like - what a failure - and those words he had uttered - "If all leave you Lord, I never will, I will even go to death with you" - how hollow they sounded now. What a mess; the great Peter, really humbled. And of course, when you are feeling a bit low - the enemy, the devil, doesn't say - Poor chap - he's feeling a bit low, I'll leave him alone for while, till he is feeling fitter for a fight. No way - the enemy is in there, adding fuel to Peter's depression - What a useless waste of space you are! Thought you were so smart didn't you? Well, now you know that you are not much good for anything - best thing you can do is to get back to your fishing - it's about the only thing you seem

capable of doing.

But of course - the enemy is going to make him feel even worse, because off goes Peter for a fish, and... disaster - he doesn't catch anything at all, the whole night - it's useless - he can't even fish. And I wouldn't mind betting that towards dawn, the enemy is whispering - "Why don't you just slip over the side, just finish it all, Peter. Just be like Judas. You can never be forgiven you know - you've committed the ultimate sin - there's no way back!"

But as they row back to the shore, this hungry, exhausted, depressed little crew, all feeling a failure – Hadn't Jesus said to four of them – Leave your nets and follow me, from now on you will catch people? But as the dawn breaks – drifting across the water a wonderful aroma, you know, the smell we get as we pass a fish and chip shop on a Saturday evening, a smell which says, come on in, cod and chips are frying. But there in the half light is a figure on the beach, and that wonderful voice calling out, "Children, have you any fish." "No, not even a tiddler." Then throw your net out on the right side of the boat.... and then the miracle, and in no time, it seems, they are on the shore, counting with disbelief 153 fish. And then a wonderful breakfast, presided over by the risen Lord. I am so encouraged by this – how do you, how do I deal with those who have let me down, the one I thought was my best friend, and then failed me? This little group of sheepish men who had all run away when the chips were down, led by a man who Jesus thought was his best friend, and in the end

said that he didn't even know him, and how does Jesus deal with them? He teaches them first – if you want to bring in a wonderful harvest, then you must do it with me, and then he serves them, he models the way the church is to be, with the leader being the servant, washing the feet of the others and serving them breakfast after a night of failure. That's the church as it should be, the place where when we fail, we are loved, restored, accepted, forgiven and equipped to go out and have another go.

And how does Jesus deal with that desperate, penitent Peter, who is longing to make amends, but is feeling that never again will he have a part to play in the gospel story - who thinks that he and Judas together will go down in history as the two friends of Jesus who completely failed. Jesus deals with Peter so graciously and gently. Giving Peter a wonderful chance to put it all right.

Having had breakfast, and feeling restored physically, Jesus takes Peter off to one side. Peter you remember said, "Lord if everyone falls away and leaves you - I never will" and so Jesus the first time says, Simon son of John do you love me more than these". The word that Jesus uses for love is the word "agape" that utter self-giving love - a love that goes all the way for the beloved one - to crucifixion and death. Peter responds with the word "philos". A wiser man now, he goes only as far as reality will let him - "Yes Lord you know that I am your friend" is the best translation at this point. Jesus then commissions this man, who has come to know himself a good

deal better, as well as knowing Jesus, and knowing and understanding the cost. "Feed my lambs". Look after the young ones, the lambs, the children, the weak, the disabled, the marginalised - Peter be like me, the good shepherd, says Jesus - care for the ones that are so often missed.

Jesus asks the question a second time though this time with no comparison to the others - Just - "Do you love me". Peter again responds, You know that I am your friend. Jesus commissions him to look after and care for the older sheep in the flock - tending them, nurturing them. The third time Jesus asks the question, but this time he uses the word philos - in fact - Simon son of John are you my friend? Is even this true? - Peter felt hurt - I am sure that this third time Jesus was gently reminding him of the times he had denied his Lord - but also that Jesus is now questioning - are you really my friend. Peter however is afforded the opportunity to say a big yes, to say "You know everything - you know that I am your friend...." Jesus then gives Peter the authority to lead the whole church forward - "Feed my sheep".

It is interesting to note that Jesus' questioning follows a declining scale as it were - First, Do you love me more than all the others with a self-giving, all committed love? Then simply Do you love me? And thirdly Are you my friend? The commissions however follow an ascending scale - Take charge of the little ones, then; guide the flock; then supply the needs of the whole flock.

Peter is being given the responsibility of the whole flock. I always think of the story of the man who lost his company a million pounds. He was hauled in, in front of the boss, told to explain himself - finally the boss said, Well then young man - Get back to work! pause... Aren't you going to dismiss me? Good heavens no, said the MD - we have just spent a million pounds so that you can learn how not to do it - now get back to work and learn from that mistake.

When all fails, that is when we learn to cry out to Jesus, that's when He comes, and that's when we start to get it right. Know yourself, walk humbly, forgive others when they get it wrong, because you and I know we do too. Remember that church is a school for forgiven sinners, not a club for saints. From the top down if we are honest, we have tried, failed, and then been raised up by a kind and gracious and loving God who delights to use broken people like Peter and you and me, in his mission to the world. And in our first reading, we read of Peter doing the work – raising a woman from death.

And remember this. Do you love me? This can seem so easy – Of course we love you Jesus. But for Jesus to love you and me, it meant laying down his life for us. Simon Peter do you love me? And for Peter to answer that with “Yes Lord, you know that I love you,” meant not just a happy cosy feeling, but to lay down his life for Jesus. Jim, John, Marion, Dawn, whoever, do you love me? If we say yes, it may well mean us laying down our lives, being prepared to go all the way for Jesus, ready to give our all for Him, to die for him, to take up

our cross for Him, to be a new person for Him. Ransomed,
healed, restored, forgiven we too venture out to live our lives
for him in the power of His Spirit.
