

Feed my Lambs Reading: John 21.1-19

At some time or another most of us have been in the situation where we have safely set the course of our lives, but then something unexpected happens to cut right across our neat plans. We have been forced to rethink our life and where we are going.

For some perhaps there has been a failure in examinations, closing the opportunity of a chosen career. For others the loss of employment. For another the death of a loved one. For another the breakdown of a marriage...

In whatever way the change has been forced upon us, the result has been devastating, striking at the core of our being, leading us to question who we are and what our life is all about. In some circumstances we have feelings of guilt, failure and worthlessness. How can we face up to life? Can we ever begin again? Will it be possible to rebuild what is now broken?

We can imagine that Peter felt like this, perhaps he needed to be on his own to think it through, he told his friends "I'm going fishing.

Only seven of the eleven disciples were there. All of them were confused. Three and a half years ago Jesus had called them to follow him. They were amazing years. They had heard his teaching, witnessed his miracles, observed his prayer life, discovered who he really was.

Jesus had said, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt. 4.19). I wonder if, during that time, they ever had that nagging feeling, "Some day Jesus is going to get us to do this." There was, that time when he had sent them out two by two (Mt. 10). What an astonishing time - they had witnessed miracles at their own hands! But there had been a certain security about it - Jesus was there to give support.

They had followed Jesus through the towns and villages and finally to Jerusalem. Jesus faced bitter opposition from the Jewish leaders - which led to his brutal execution on a Roman cross. Had their "fishing for men" led only to this, only to the cross?

But now they had seen Jesus alive - Mary Magdalene had seen him! Ten of the disciples had themselves seen him, while they met in secret behind closed doors. He had said to them, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Jesus had breathed on them and said,

"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (Jn 20.19-23).

But what did it all mean? In a sense they were re-evaluating, not only their convictions about who Jesus was and what he had come to do, but their whole lives. What had Jesus meant when he had called them to follow him? They had certainly followed him, had watched and listened, had learnt a great deal and then... they had failed the exam! Yet the risen Lord Jesus had now said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you"! The risen Lord still had a claim over them, still had expectations for them!

For a professional like Peter to say "Who would like to go fishing?" meant something quite different from the same words on the lips of an amateur. He was on the brink of a decision - would this be a casual outing? or a return to his old lifestyle? His brother Andrew wasn't there and they had three non-professionals on board too. Perhaps Peter wanted to evaluate - what's it to be, fishing for men?

Amateur fishermen know that there are times of good catches and other times when the only bites are the mozzies!

This time they hadn't caught a thing. What's the matter? Had Peter lost his touch? Had he lost the edge. Has following Jesus made him worse, not better off?

Then as the sun begins to rise they see someone at the water's edge looking out towards them. Some jogger? we might have thought. It could have been anyone really. And his guidance to a large catch of fish - later they counted a hundred and fifty-three big fish.

When Jesus had called Peter to follow, he had said, "I will make you fishers of men." But now - what could Peter do? - even his old fishing skills seemed not so good any more! He really wanted to be with Jesus. But - whatever could he say to Jesus? and what might Jesus say to him?

Jesus didn't say to Peter, "I'm ashamed of you, Peter! Why didn't you stay by me, like you said? I'll never trust you again!" Nor did he say, "I told you so! I knew you wouldn't keep your promise!"

Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" Behind those words lie all of Peter's promises of loyalty. Matthew records Peter's words like this, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (26.33). And now it's as if Jesus is saying, "Remember what you said,

Peter? Is your love really greater than the others?" Peter insists, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

There is a point of contrast in the Greek original that doesn't come over clearly into English. We use our word "love" to cover so many different things. It translates to at least three different Greek words - two of which are present in the passage. One of them, *Agape*-love, is a strong word which speaks of commitment. The other, *Philia*-love, which isn't as strong and refers to friendship. Let's separate them out a bit further as "love" and "friendship" so that we can catch the feel of this passage.

Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, do you love me more than the others?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I am friendly towards you." He doesn't use that strong word for "love" to describe his feelings towards the Lord.

Then Jesus says, "Simon, do you love me?" and Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I am friendly towards you." Verse 17 - the third time Jesus says to him, "Simon son of John, are you friendly towards me?" Peter is hurt because on this third time Jesus asks, "Are you friendly towards me?"

Peter is grief-stricken because the third question is different. Jesus has noticed. He understands that the old brashness is gone, Peter now can only claim friendship, not love. So Peter says, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I am friendly towards you."

Now comes the incredible part. Jesus could have said, "OK, Peter. So you have failed me. You sincerely wanted to love me with a commitment that you were even prepared to die for me. But you didn't make it. I can see that you are sorry, and I'm glad to have you as one of my friends. But - Peter! I'll never trust you again! The work still to be done is so important that it wouldn't be fair to you, to me or to anyone!"

But it wasn't like that at all!

Back in the upper room Luke records that, before Peter had made his great profession of allegiance, Jesus made this prediction, "Simon, Simon, I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Lk.22.31,32).

And here we have Jesus talking to the same Simon Peter - after he has denied his Lord three times. Simon Peter who has genuine friendship towards Jesus but not yet the deep commitment of love.

"Simon," Jesus is saying to him, "Feed my lambs!" Did you hear that? Feed my lambs! Simon, I called you long ago to leave those fishing nets because I have work for you to do - and I haven't given up on you! I still have work for you to do. Feed my lambs! Watch out for my little ones. They are precious to my heavenly Father - be sure to feed them!

"Take care of my sheep!" Remember, Simon, what I said about my sheep, the people who believe in me. I came so that they might have life and have it to the full (Jn 10.10). As the good shepherd I have laid down my life for them. "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also..." (v.16). Simon, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep!

In the reading from John chapter 21, Simon is in despair following his denial of Jesus at the trial. But Jesus speaks to Simon as he always has, not blaming him or condemning him. No Jesus says to him, as my disciple, your task is to feed and take care of my sheep and lambs.

In our reading from Acts chapter 9, Saul is confronted by Jesus who he is persecuting. He is blinded by the bright light and is led into the city of Damascus. After three days, Ananias, Jesus disciple, calls on the Holy Spirit, in Jesus name to remove Saul's blindness, Saul is cured, he is baptised and as a fervent follower of Jesus seeks out the sheep and the lambs and cares for them in Jesus name.

Both Saul and Simon followed Jesus instructions spreading the gospel, until their death at the hands of Jesus enemies.

Today our world our country, is in the grip of the terrible Coronavirus, the like of which we have never seen before. Many of us, following the government instructions are tied to our homes, self isolating. Many thousands of people have died, many people have lost their jobs and businesses, to control the spread of the virus.

So where do we stand, I think like Saul and Simon we too need to seek the guidance and support Jesus can bring to us.

On Easter Sunday I was greatly encourage by the Happy Easter messages on WhatsApp from fellowship members. As we watch our news bulletins, we could so easily become depressed, but I have been encouraged by the care and support so many people are giving.

A motor cycle group of about twenty riders, delivering food and other essentials to those who need it. One woman on her own, providing urgent

supplies to mums, nappies, baby food etc, etc. Taxi drivers providing free transport to essential medical workers. Boots together with Walgreens issuing cleaning fluids, soaps, medicated tissues, cleaning materials of all kinds.

Doesn't it make your heart feel glad, as you hear of the support and care others are giving at this time of hardship and lock down.

Do we as Jesus followers, want to join with others to meet the needs of our world, to feed Jesus sheep and lambs. We may not physically be able to leave our homes but we can provide hope and support in other ways. All of us have phones which we can use, to contact others to support and encourage, to share Gods love. How about joining the prayers every evening with other fellowship members, lighting a candle in the window at 7 o'clock every evening, sharing our love of Jesus. At 8 o'clock Thursday evenings, we can stand at our window or front to clap or cheer to bring our thanks and encouragement to the workers in the NHS. The thing is that as we seek to encourage one another, so we too are encouraged. Did Jesus barrack, shout or condemn Simon, no he encouraged him, wanted to continue to use him in the work of the Kingdom.

I believe at this time of epidemic our task is to support and encourage others. Look for the positive caring reports in our news bulletins and pass them. As workers in God's Kingdom, we need to be built up in our Faith not drained out.

So let join with others sharing in the Sunday Services which Andrea, Jenny and Bruce prepare, also the Monday and Wednesday morning prayers. As soldiers of Christ, let us polish up our armour and stand firm together, seeking out Jesus sheep and lambs, let us through the power of God's Holy spirit be a blessing to others as we seek to do the will of the Father.

Jesus asks us do you love me, if our answer is yes, Jesus calls us to feed his Sheep and his Lambs.

Let us pray

Loving Father, in this time of isolation from our loved ones and friends, help as to be beacons of light, shining out into your world, bringing care and love to others as our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ taught us to do. AMEN