

As we come to the end of the gospel of John we have this amazing scene between Jesus and Peter. Think about the atmosphere around the fire and food. Probably there was lots of small talk, but no one dare mention the elephant in the room. While everyone there had deserted Jesus in His time of seemingly greatest need, Peter was the one who denied him in such a forceful way. I can imagine Peter sitting on the opposite side of the fire, eating, munching, only stealing a glance toward Jesus, and wondering what Jesus would say about his actions.

It seems as if the head off along the shore, giving Jesus and Peter the chance to be together. So Jesus asked, “Simon, do you love me more than these?” Than these? What are ‘these’ that Jesus is talking about? Could he have pointed at the disciples as if to say, “I remember what you said, but did your actions match your words? They left me but you denied me.” Possibly. Could Jesus have pointed at the fishing boat when he said, “These?” Peter had just led the group by saying, “I don’t know what you guys are going to do, but I’m going to return to what I know best, I’m going fishing.” He almost was saying, “It was a good run and I enjoyed the ride, but now it’s time to return to reality.” Could Jesus have been pointing to the food at the fire and have meant comfort and security? Before we jump on Peter and the disciples too harshly, I wonder if we can’t see something of ourselves in them? When was the last time you passed the stick-a-bility test? Has there been a social setting when Christ’s modern-day accusers were so in control of the moment that you or I, feeling the heat, betrayed him? Have you been caught in a circumstance where you were the minority and rather than lose social or business acceptability you forsook him? Has there been a time recently when you found it easier to be Politically Correct than Biblically right. When Jesus asks you, “Do you love me more than these,” it is not intended to be an easy question, it is one to which we must give proper consideration. We cannot ‘love Jesus more than these’ and put ‘these’ ahead of Him.

Jesus asked Peter, and he asks us, the hard questions, the questions which make us want to squirm. I can imagine that Peter didn’t even look at Jesus as he spoke the words, “Yes Lord, you know I love you.” Peter’s tone was probably not really convincing and certainly

gave the overtone that, “I really don’t want to talk about this, what’s done is done.” But that is not how Jesus works. For there to be full restoration there must be full repentance. Jesus asked the hard question and when Peter, like us, wanted to dodge the issue, Jesus pressed it home, knowing that it was for Peter’s good.

The most remarkable thing about it is that, by way of forgiveness, Jesus gives Peter a job to do. When Peter says that he loves Jesus, Jesus doesn't say, ‘Oh, that's okay then’. He says, ‘feed my sheep’.

The three questions correspond to Peter's three denials. Three for completeness but three also for the reminder. The smell of the charcoal fire lingers. Peter's night of agony - and Jesus’ own night of agony - returns. But the former can be dealt with because of the latter. Jesus is the Passover lamb who takes away the sin of the world, Peter's sin included, your sin, my sin.

The way in which sin is taken away varies from individual to individual. It isn't just a matter of a divine decree being issued, wiping the slate clean. It is more than that. There may be nothing officially on the record about us but there may still be plenty in our memories and imaginations: old failings, old sores, old wounds. Like a computer with faulty and virus ridden software on the hard disk, we need to have it dealt with before we can operate to maximum efficiency again.

So Jesus goes to where the pain is, as he so often does. He asks Peter the question that goes to the heart of it all: do you love me? It would be possible to make something of the fact that when Peter replies to Jesus he uses a different word for love but I think what really matters is that the question is asked and answered; and, even more, the answer earns, each time, not a pat on the back but a command. A fresh challenge. A new commission. Time to learn how to be a shepherd. Time to feed lambs and sheep and to learn to look after them.

Not only is this a fresh commission where Jesus is trusting Peter to get back to fruitful work, it is a commission in which Jesus is sharing his own work with Peter. Jesus is, after all, the good Shepherd. He has

the task of leading and feeding his sheep, guiding them to and from pasture. He knows them and they know him. He has now given his life for them. But the commission of John 20:21 is very specific - *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*. There's no getting away from it. And it means that Peter is to share Jesus task of shepherding.

Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay or ordained, full-time or part-time, at home, at work or in the church. It's the secret of everything from being a quiet, back row member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it's built on. Somewhere in us there is a love for Jesus and even though we've let him down so many times, he wants to find that love, to give us a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give us new work to do.

These are not things for us to do to earn forgiveness. Nothing can ever do that. It is grace from start to finish. They are things to do out of the joy and relief that we are already forgiven. Things we're given to do precisely as the sign that we are forgiven. Things that will be costly, because Jesus own work cost everything. Things that will mean following Jesus into suffering, perhaps even to death. Indeed, Peter will complete his task as a Shepherd by laying down his own life, in turn, for the sheep.

Peter went from strength to strength. He was still muddled from time to time, as acts indicates. But he became a shepherd. He loved Jesus and looked after his sheep. No one could ask for more. Jesus never asks for less.

Having been given his task Peter saw that John was following them and it seems the most natural thing in the world that he would ask Jesus whether John would share the work and the same fate. They had shared so much together. But he had to learn that God gives each of us different roles to play and we need to learn, and remember, that we are called to follow Jesus wherever he leads *us*, not wherever he leads the person next to us.

It is likely that this whole chapter has been added to the story because of a rumour that had gone around in the early church, based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus had said to Peter, that John would be the one original apostle who would remain alive until the Lord returned. It is likely that the elderly apostle, or someone else at his dictation, wrote chapter 21 and added it to the book that had already been finished. The book already has a proper conclusion in chapter 20:30-31 *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.* ³¹ *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* However, without the whole story of the miracle, breakfast and the conversation with Peter, it is very difficult to explain how the misunderstanding about John came about. This time, instead of telling us why he's written the things he has, John tells us what would have happened if he'd tried to write down all of the other things too. John 21:25 *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*

It does raise the question though: if you don't believe that Jesus is God, what else would John need to have written to convince you? If you do already believe, do you need more to convince you to put 'these' aside and take the next steps of faith?

The ultimate point, however, is this. Once the Word has become flesh, all the books in the world cannot do it justice. Nothing less than flesh can now do meaning to the Word: my flesh and your flesh. Books can reach into the world a little but our lives, lived in the power of the Spirit, have the potential to reach whole communities. The disciples of Jesus are sent 'into the world', not just in the first century, but in every generation. 'The world' remains the object of God's saving love, the reason Jesus died. Just as he was sent into it by the Father, so he now sends us. And, whatever part we are called to play, we go to it with his words ringing in our ears: *I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In*

this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world.