

Peter forgiven

14 4 13

Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples
with the sight of the risen Lord:
give us such knowledge of his presence with us
that we may be strengthened and sustained
by his risen life
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth.

Our text today is from John's gospel, chapter 21 and verse 16:

'Simon, son of John, do you love me?'

Last week, we saw Thomas having his faith in Jesus confirmed when he had tangible proof that Jesus had risen from the dead. This week, we see Peter having his faith in himself restored when he meets the risen Lord Jesus on the shores of Lake Galilee where he eats an impromptu, alfresco breakfast with Jesus and six other disciples.

Peter is in denial. Three times the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter denied knowing Jesus. Despite the best of intentions Peter's courage failed him. Peter had the courage to follow the men who had arrested Jesus and led him to the High Priest's house. Peter had the courage to hang around the courtyard. But that night, in the dark and the cold and with the threat of his own arrest, Peter hid behind a lie. 'I

don't know the man!' Peter lied in order to save his own skin. When the cock crowed a second time, he ran off into the coming dawn in the darkness of despair. Peter's may have been in a dark place mentally and emotionally but just three days later, there is the news from the women that the tomb is empty, the stone rolled away and Jesus is risen from the dead. And Peter, having run to the tomb and seen for himself, knows the truth of what they say. But the guilt of denial still weighs heavily on him so what does he do ? – something we all might do – lose ourselves in work. So back home, for whatever reason, in Galilee, off they go fishing – seven of them just like the old days. But the night proves a waste of time – they catch nothing ! But in the early morning light, John catches sight of a stranger on the shore who tells them where to cast their net and their haul of fish is nearly overwhelming. And at this point, John recognises Jesus and Peter puts his clothes back on to swim to the shore with all the enthusiasm of a pet dog who has lost then just found his master!

After breakfast, Jesus cherishes Peter in an extraordinary way, offering him forgiveness of the thing that troubles him most, which he can't articulate, the fact that confronted by their enemies, Peter denied the man he loves. So what does Jesus do ? With the smell of the charcoal fire over which Jesus had just cooked their breakfast, the wood smoke redolent of that night Peter denied Jesus, Jesus asks Peter three times the question 'Do you love me?' Three times Peter says yes and three times Jesus tells Peter to act as a shepherd would towards his flock. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is commissioning Peter to carry on their work.

It is extraordinary and what surprises and encourages me is the fact that Peter is being forgiven for something that he cannot bring himself to name then ask for forgiveness. Peter is deeply ashamed of his lack of courage, mortified that he could be so weak as to deny the man whom he followed and trusted and knew to be the Son of God, the Messiah. Having been a coward, how can Peter live with himself ? But Jesus rescues him from the dark place in which he is trapped. By asking a simple question, Jesus is showing Peter where Peter's priorities truly lie and that the lie of Peter saying he does not know Jesus is forgiven as their relationship is restored.

I'm impressed. I'm well impressed. We all need to be forgiven and mostly we need to ask for forgiveness to receive absolution – the forgiveness of our wrongdoing. But here Peter is being forgiven for what he has done wrong without first asking to be forgiven. Perhaps if we too are truly sorry in our heart for a wrongdoing we cannot bring ourselves to name out loud, then perhaps, like Peter, in God's gracious mercy, we may still receive forgiveness for which we long.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermon 27 : Peter forgiven

