

Homily for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 1 May 2022

A Difficult Conversation (John 21:15-19)

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

The last human encounter in John's gospel is an exchange between Jesus and Peter. It's a conversation that reveals something intriguing about Jesus' approach to holding a difficult conversation and handling conflict.

However, before examining this crucial conversation, we should first recall that there's a fraught back story, focused on the hours before Jesus was executed and died. Back then, Peter made wild promises, about being prepared to die for Jesus. A few hours later, Peter rashly drew his sword, when armed forces came to arrest Jesus – for which Jesus rebuked him. Then, after following the group that arrests Jesus, Peter faced some probing questioning from a little servant girl. In the face of which, Peter had wilted, rather feebly. He denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. And all the while, Jesus had watched Peter abandoning him to humiliation and horror. Then, after being whipped, frog-marched and nailed to a cross, Jesus had died in agony, alone on the cross, with Peter – well, nowhere to be seen. Yet, despite it all, death had not held Jesus. Peter had witnessed the same, and puzzled over what it meant that Jesus was 'risen'.

In anyone's book, that's a lot to have gone through in a very short period: enough, you might think, to blot out what had happened on that fateful final night, first in the upper room, then in the garden and later in the courtyard.

However, what's clear from today's story is that Jesus does not forget Peter's betrayal of him. Jesus also knows that Peter himself cannot forget his abandonment of his Lord, and his failure to stand up and be counted. So, where now?

As we come to the conversation we're reflecting on this morning, let's remember that the main events in Jerusalem have passed, some weeks before. The immediate heat and shock of these events has died down. Peter and a few other disciples have wandered back up north, to Galilee, to somewhere they feel more comfortable – back to their old trade, fishing from small boats. It's early morning. Peter and his friends have been up all night; and have caught – nothing. Embarrassingly, a shadowy figure asks what success they've had; then tells them to re-cast their nets on the other side. Suddenly the fishermen are swamped by an overwhelming catch. Lest we forget, this is a *déjà-vu* moment for Peter: as Luke records, a similar incident happened around the time of Peter's first call.

It becomes clear that the shadowy figure is, of course, Jesus. What *is* he doing there, on the shoreline, early in the morning, up in Galilee? Only after they've shared a substantial breakfast together, does Peter find out. Jesus invites Peter to walk with him along the shoreline. As Peter discovers, that's the reason that Jesus has come. He's come for *that* conversation, the one Peter was really, somehow, hoping to avoid.

However, Jesus does not tackle Peter's betrayal directly. He addresses Peter by his birth name and asks a challenging question: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' How can Peter answer such a question? How can he compare his love with that of others?

But Peter is also taken back to his own fateful words, 'Even if all abandon you, *I* will never betray you.' There is now no hiding. The emptiness of Peter's earlier claim is suddenly thrust upon him. He replies feebly, if honestly, 'You know that I care for you.'¹

However, Jesus isn't done. He asks a second time, 'Do you love me – enough to lay down your life for me?' What can Peter say? He is no longer prepared to overstate matters. 'Lord, you know that I care for you.'

But Jesus is not letting Peter off the hook just yet. There were three denials. So, inevitably, there's a third question: 'Simon Peter, do you *really* care for me?' Peter is cut to the quick, and it hurts. In exasperation he replies, 'Lord, you know everything; you *know* that I care for you.'

Peter no illusions left about himself – or about his love for Jesus. And it's this Peter, shorn of self-delusion, whom Jesus commissions afresh for ministry. Three times Peter hears a new call: 'Feed my lambs.' 'Tend my sheep.' 'Feed my sheep.'

With the sword of his mouth, combining challenge with caring, Jesus gently but incisively lays bare the limits of Peter's love, and the reality of his failure.

And, with the same sword, Jesus restores Peter to leadership in the community of disciples. And then, perhaps unkindly, Jesus twists the sword one final time. He reveals that Peter will indeed lay down his life for his Lord.

What about us, then? Well, just like Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, we can often be tempted to draw our swords when facing tension and conflict. Like Peter, we can fail Jesus at critical moments. And, just like Peter, we can delude ourselves about the extent of our love for Jesus.

But, as with Peter, Jesus can also transfigure our violent tendencies and our failures to love God. Sometimes paradoxically, as with Peter, through a wounding that is designed to heal.

And then almost miraculously, we find that Jesus can recommission us to work for peace in the service of the Christian community and the wider world. As to Peter, Jesus invites each of us: ‘Follow me. Keep following me. No matter how much you’ve failed in the past – keep following.’

Maybe there’s a difficult conversation that you’ve been putting off having with someone, perhaps someone whom you’ve been close to in the past. Our gospel today is a reminder that God can be powerfully present when we have the courage to face and hold such a conversation – especially when we choose the right or ripe moment, when the intense heat has subsided.

Or, perhaps, there’s a difficult conversation that you’ve been putting off having with God, over something where you feel you’ve failed God, or that’s a hidden source of shame in your life. Maybe now’s the time to open yourself up to that conversation, knowing that it may be hard. But realising too that having the conversation is the only way to healing. And, in due course, to being recommissioned in God’s service.

In which case, the invitation this morning is simple: follow Jesus. He’s waiting for you – waiting on the shoreline.

ⁱ Sam Wells highlights the two different kinds of love used in the original Greek: a difference between *philein*, to cherish, and *agapein*, to lay down one’s life.