

# **Sermon on Sunday 1 May 2022**

## **by Rev. Alan Stewart**

*(Readings: Acts 9. 1-6 & John 21. 15-19)*

### **Do you love me?**

'Did Eve have a belly-button?'

'Why did God make wasps?'

'Is Jesus a zombie?'

Children ask the greatest questions.

Fans of the sitcom *Outnumbered* will know just how those questions can flummox parents and expose all kinds of adult hypocrisy!

The standard parental answer, of course, to the many 'Why?' questions children ask is, 'Because...', and if that doesn't work... 'Because I say so'.

Some of us will have had a similar response, perhaps when asking our own questions of faith; 'Because... because The Bible says so'. A word of warning, however - those three words, 'The Bible says', aren't just, in my opinion, lazy, they're dangerous, because the Bible is a library of many voices and too easily we can make 'The Bible' say what we want it to.

Questions are good. Questions are an essential part of faith, because 'the unexamined faith', to misquote Socrates, 'is not worth living'. Beware, therefore, of anyone who claims to have all the answers.

Jesus himself was a man of few answers. Frustratingly, he would deal in stories and reply to questions with more questions.

Sometimes his questions helped expose hypocrisy but, usually, it was his way of helping people make connections, discover something new or real within themselves.

Three times in our reading today, he asks this same question: 'Peter, do you love me?'

By way of background, it was Peter, of course, who had, just days before, publicly disowned his rabbi and best friend. Around a fire in the high priest's courtyard, he'd called down curses and insisted three times, 'I don't know him'. And who can blame him, actually, in the circumstances? To admit to this could have signed his own death warrant.

'Peter, do you love me?' If we think about it, Jesus' question is among the most vulnerable anyone can ask, because in asking such a question we're opening ourselves to the possibility that the answer might just be, 'No... I don't love you'.

We don't know how Jesus knew about Peter's denial. Maybe Peter had shared it with the others and they'd shared it with Jesus. Personally, if I was Peter, I'd keep that to myself, bury it alongside the other regrets and guilty secrets.

Clearly, Jesus would have been justified in the circumstances to ask a very different question: 'Peter, why did you do it?', 'Peter, aren't you ashamed?', 'Peter, give me one reason to forgive you'.

Instead, having cooked a breakfast this time around a beach fire, he invites Peter to go for a walk, away from the others. We don't know if this was the first time they'd actually spoken since Peter and the others had deserted Jesus in the garden. I imagine that, regardless, Peter couldn't quite look Jesus in the eye. So, side-by-side they walk, the best way often for a heart-to-heart, for men in particular.

No small talk, though, just straight in with, 'Peter, do you love me?'. And not once, but three times Jesus asks that same question.

First time, I imagine Peter's embarrassed (that's a bit intense). Second time, maybe he's annoyed (he doesn't believe me). Third time, it hits home what Jesus is doing.

You see, three times Peter disowned Jesus and three times Jesus asks his question: 'Peter, do you love me?'. Without mentioning the elephant on the beach, Jesus is gently letting Peter know that he knows. But instead of picking at the wound of Peter's shame, Jesus cuts to the heart of things. 'Peter, do you love me?' In other words, 'Is our relationship worth it? Because, if it is, that's all that matters; that's all I need to know'.

I can't think of a gentler, more loving way of reconciling. I'd want to rake up that past, tell him how he made me feel. Jesus chooses not to do that. Notice that he doesn't ignore or deny what happened. Notice, too, that Jesus doesn't demand an apology. His questions were not designed to humiliate Peter, but to reinstate him; to give Peter back his sense of worth and belonging.

Jesus chose to forego the need for an apology, and chose instead to absorb the pain of a friend's betrayal.

Jesus knew that what Peter did could have destroyed him, like it destroyed Judas. So, he reaches out with the same hand that had saved him from sinking under the waves. Jesus walks his own talk. A few chapters previously, you might remember that Peter had asked Jesus, 'How many times do I forgive?'. To which Jesus had said, 'seventy times seven'; in other words, forgiveness keeps on forgiving.

Forgiveness sees reconciliation as the end goal; not reparation, not vengeance, not even justice.

Forgiveness costs the forgiver.

But note that it's not permission to hurt again. There are expectations. 'Peter, if you love me', Jesus says, 'you will do something; you will love these others. Feed my sheep, keep on loving, keep on forgiving, continue my work'.

Before this conversation, Peter's wound, his shame, was open, unfinished. Afterwards I like to think he'd forgiven himself; he'd learnt a deep lesson in the ways of love; he was on track to feeling whole again.

I wonder if we have experienced betrayal in our life. I wonder if there are people we cannot look in the eye, or be in the same room with, or who we refuse to or have yet to reconcile with. I do.

As I wrote in the latest magazine letter, I know in my heart of hearts that that stalemate is a prison for us both; a prison of my own making.

I wonder if we live with regret, wishing we could turn back the clock, do things, say things differently. I do.

I wonder if we live with guilt or shame, and you'll know that the difference, according to Brené Brown, is that guilt is 'I did something wrong', whereas shame is deeper, 'I am something wrong'.

Do we know that we can bring all of this to that same Jesus who so kindly and so gently reinstated his friendship? No fear, no reprisal, no condemnation.

The first thing is simply to name it, bring it into the compassionate light of God. So, if it helps, I invite you in the silence to say, 'I give this to you', or 'I'm not ready, but I want to want to give it, forgive it, let go'.

The reality with regrets or the things that grieve us, is that they are seldom removed in a moment. But naming them and bringing them is a first step.

And if we can surrender some of that hurt or need for apology or justice, then we ask for the grace and the courage to absorb it and to leave it in the hands of our Maker.

A moment of silence.

## A prayer

We will not pretend that all this part of our pained life is now at ease, nor that our bound self is set free, nor that we necessarily feel our woundedness to be forgiven, that our fears and chaos have ended, and our spirit is at peace.

We will simply leave all this truth about ourselves respectfully with our God and redeemer, and move as far as we can today, coming back to attend to it when we can, today or another day.

We are not alone, all of us share in this human reality. The tears we shed are our shared tears. That is our strength as we travel this life together. That is the beginning of grace. There is a God who has travelled this pathway, who also shed tears and experienced all that we experience, was tempted like us, angry like us, afraid like us, wounded like us.

This God waits to meet us in the next moment.



## **Readings:**

### **John 21. 15-19**

<sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> 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." <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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." <sup>19</sup> (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

### **Acts 9. 1-6**

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."