



Easter 3, Year C – April 18, 2010

John 21.1-19

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

So let me see if I have this straight. Jesus asks Peter not once, not twice, but three times if Peter loves him, and Peter's feelings are hurt. Peter's feelings are hurt?! Wouldn't you think in this situation that it was Jesus, and Jesus alone, whose feelings might be hurt? -- Jesus, whom Peter had denied, not once, not twice, but three times? Now you know Peter had to be feeling ashamed about what he did the night of Jesus' arrest. What is astonishing is that he is able so quickly to put his own emotional needs ahead of those of Jesus. Samuel Wells¹ writes that "it is a feature of reconciliation that the person offering forgiveness cannot expect the other party fully to understand the depths of their offence." That is, most of the people, most of the time (including ourselves) never really "get" how much damage our silly little flip remarks, our thoughtless actions, our self-centred attitudes, our leaving undone "that which we ought to have done" wrecks. And from the side of the one offended, this is what makes forgiveness so costly.

This story of a breakfast meeting between the resurrected Christ and seven of his disciples describes the inauguration of a new relationship between Peter and Jesus, although ironically, it is a relationship in which nothing Jesus knows about Peter has changed – Jesus knew Peter was weak-willed and impetuous; Jesus even knew that Peter would not stand up under the strain of his arrest and trial – but in which everything Peter knows about *himself* has been changed. That is, Peter now knows that he is not the man he thought he was; he now knows what *Jesus* knew. And he admits as much, "Lord, you know everything." What a gift – I think most of us spend most of our lives desperate for someone to know who we are in our deepest selves. Healthy relationships require not just that we have a fairly accurate view of the other: they also require that we cleanse our minds and hearts of self-deception. We are called to know ourselves as God knows us. In their pastoral ministry, clergy are fond of asking people who describe a difficult situation they are facing, "Where is God in this for you?" I prefer a different question: "Where are you in this for God?" That is, how does God see you in this situation – because God is seeing the real you.

Another notable feature of this story turns on Jesus' and Peter's respective views of the bond between them. Without delving into the niceties of the two Greek words for love (*agape* and *philia*) which are used in this story, their conversation goes like this:

Jesus asks Peter, "Peter, do you love me wholeheartedly, without thought for yourself, and differently than the way you love the others?" (You need to imagine Jesus poking his head in the direction of the other six.) And Peter basically says, No. I love you just the way I love them, as a friend. Except that Peter doesn't mean, "No". He just means (and picture a puppy all over you here), Yes, Lord, yes, yes, I "like" you. He thinks he's giving the Jesus the answer he wants.

Jesus repeats the question. Perhaps Peter didn't hear that he was asking for something more than puppy love. "Peter, do you love me wholeheartedly, with no

¹ This entire homily is heavily dependent upon, and reworks, ideas expressed by Wells in *Power & Passion: Six Characters in Search of Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), pp 144-149.

thought for yourself?" But Peter responds, once again, with an affirmation of mere friendship. "Yes, Lord, I like you." And here is the clincher. Jesus realizes that Peter is just not ready to give what he has asked.

And so he asks the question that Peter is ready for: "All right then. Peter, do you love me as a friend?" Peter is hurt, because he has just said so, twice! But the point is that Jesus takes Peter, and us, just where we are. He provided a "stretch goal" (that's what following Jesus is all about!), but when Peter can't meet it, Jesus relents, and satisfies himself with what Peter can give. And even though it is less than he hoped, maybe even less than he needed, he carries through with his plan to put Peter in charge of the faithful.

It's a little like the churchwarden who complained vociferously to the bishop about the poor quality of clergy these days. The bishop was sympathetic. He agreed that they were a pretty poor lot. And then he said, Of course our problem is, we only have lay people to pick from. Jesus may have also have considered this a problem, but he chose Peter nonetheless. And he chooses us, too.

And this brings us to our last point. Leader though Jesus makes him, we must note that his parting words to Peter are, "*Follow me.*" In other words, it is the example of Jesus that sets the pace for us in our lives. This is an imperative for every Christian, but it is so perhaps above all, within the Church itself. Those who are "out front," as it were, scoping out the horizon and what lies in store for the Church, and proposing paths to get there without injury, must ensure that they never lose sight of the example and wisdom of Jesus on the way. We are not free to do just whatever seems swell to us, even in this time of increasing experimentation and plurality – because the reality is, just as we followed that pillar of fire into this church the night of the Great Vigil, so we are those who have committed ourselves to allow Jesus Christ to be always one step ahead of us, casting just enough light for us to see what we need to do next. Even leaders are to be followers.

As breakfast meetings go, this one was worth it!