

## **Ransomed, Healed, Restored, Forgiven The Recommissioning of Peter**

Reading John 21: 3-19

At first sight, our reading is just a simple story about our Lord's third appearance to the disciples following his resurrection, his final recorded miracle and the rebuilding of his relationship with Peter. However, as we look at the text of our reading in more detail we shall see that it is rich, subtle and full of meaning.

Since we are going to be focussing on the details of the text of the reading this morning, can I suggest that you turn to page \*\*\* in the pew bibles so that you can follow it with me.

I'm going to pass quickly over the early verses. Looking first at verses 3 to 11, there are important spiritual lessons to be learned here, but they are not the main focus of what I want to say this morning. The obvious lesson is that it is in obedience to Our Lord that we are able to recognise Him and come close to Him. So John recognised the Lord after the disciples obedience in casting down the fishing net. This revelation of Christ to the believer is at the will and control of God and comes more quickly to some than others – so that John recognised Jesus before the other disciples – although with persistence it is available to us all.

These verses also tell us that success in the Christian life is directly proportional to the degree we allow ourselves to be controlled by Jesus Christ. If the disciples had not followed his instructions over letting down the nets, they wouldn't have caught any fish.

We can also see that the events here parallel those recorded in Luke 5: 4-9 soon after Peter had been first called. I think we can be certain that this was no accident. Jesus wanted to give Peter "advance notice" that he was being recommissioned and also probably wanted

to remind him of his humble response recorded in v8 on that earlier occasion – let me just remind you of that.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

Turning now to verse 12, we read that during breakfast none of the disciples dared to question Jesus. No doubt they were all - and especially Peter - still feeling disappointed with themselves for their cowardice and abandonment of Jesus in his hour of need.

As soon as breakfast was over at the beginning of verse 15 Jesus turned to what I believe was the whole reason for this particular encounter with the disciples. The rebuilding of the relationship between Peter and Jesus and Peter's restoration and recommissioning in service to the kingdom.

To see why that was necessary we need first to turn back in your bibles to John Chapter 13 and verse 36 where Jesus spoke to the disciples of his forthcoming death and the fact that he would be leaving this earth. Let me just read that to you.

“Simon Peter asked him, Lord where are you going?

Jesus replied, Where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.

Peter asked, Lord why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.

Then Jesus answered; Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times!

In his usual reckless and impulsive way, Peter asserted that he was willing to die for Jesus. But, Jesus knew better and admonished him. He told Peter that not only was he not yet ready to face death, but further that he would soon be denying his discipleship and indeed all knowledge of Jesus – and that not just once but three times.

Let's now follow through to the beginning of the denouement – the realisation of this prophecy of denial – which you can find in John Chapter 18 starting at verse 15. You can find that on page \*\*\* of the pew bibles, let's read that together.

“Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the High Priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door.

The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in.

You are not one of his disciples are you? The girl at the door asked Peter.

He replied I am not.

It was cold, and the servants and officials stood round a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.”

It is believed that the other disciple mentioned in this passage was the Apostle John. He apparently was known in the area and had enough influence to be admitted into the courtyard. John also used his position to gain access for Peter, who too stood by the fire at which others were attempting to keep themselves warm. I am sure the fire Jesus had kindled on the beach in today's reading must have brought this scene vividly back into Peter's mind – and I am sure that was Jesus' intention.

What is most significant is that it was here that Peter made his first denial of Jesus Christ – just as Jesus had foretold. The other gospels inform us that the young girl who was the doorkeeper noticed Peter and determined him to be a Galilean because his speech betrayed him. After all, Peter was always one who had to talk and boast of his abilities. He was a rather rough-hewn fisherman who apparently was never short of words. When the young girl asked Peter if he was also a disciple of Jesus Christ, he quickly denied it.

Christians often look down upon Peter for denying Jesus Christ. After all, how could this blessed person do such a cowardly and unworthy thing? Peter had walked beside Jesus for so long, he had been exposed to the numerous miracles that Jesus performed and he had sat at Jesus' feet and routinely been saturated with the Love of God. If anyone should have had the bravery to stand up for Jesus, it should have been the only man apart from the Son of God who had walked on water, even if it was only for a brief time (**Matthew 14:29**). But, instead of "standing tall" for his Saviour, Peter launched into the first part of his triune-denial of Jesus Christ.

In fact, we should all be thankful to God for this insight into Peter's character and actions. Instead of looking down on him, we should be grateful that God has allowed us to know of this small part of Peter's life, which was recorded in all the gospels. Why? Because it assures all of us who believe in Jesus Christ that no matter how deeply we may sin and fail, God will still bring us to the place of forgiveness, peace, joy and service.

Let's now follow through to the end of the denouement, which we find again in Chapter 18 starting at verse 25. Let's read that together.

"As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, You are not one of his disciples, are you?

He denied it saying, I am not.

One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?

Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a cock began to crow."

The gospels of Mathew and Mark tell us that Peter's response to this third questioning was quite vehement, in fact he cursed this questioner. From Luke we learn that as the cock started to crow Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter. We can be sure that Peter was bitterly disappointed with himself. What we do know for certain is that he went outside and wept bitterly.

Having then looked at the background to the final crucial part of today's reading, let's return to Chapter 21 and verse 15. In our English translation, Jesus is simply asking Peter "do you truly love me more than these". However, this verse, indeed this whole section, is much more interesting and meaningful if we just spend a few moments looking at the words used in the original Greek text.

In English we have just one word for love – love. However, in Greek there are four words for love in common use. Which is how the title to C S Lewis' well known book *The Four Loves* was derived. These four words are firstly 'Eros' which relates to romantic or sexual love, secondly, 'storge' which is really just affection, thirdly 'phileo' which is a friendly reciprocal love such as might exist between close friends or family members and fourthly 'agapeo' which is a completely unselfish unconditional love such as God has for mankind. Agapeo love is thus very special. It was by this agapeo love that Jesus said the world would know that the disciples were his followers in John 13:35.

So returning to our verse 15 Jesus is asking Peter if he agapeo loves him more than the other disciples. Duly chastened from his recent experience of his three-fold denial, Peter replies that Jesus knows that he Peter phileo loves Jesus and makes no mention of any comparison with the love born by the other disciples – a strong contrast with Peter's usual boastful impulsive ways! Before his recent experiences, I am sure Peter would have been quick to affirm his agapeo love and to boast that it was greater than that of all the other disciples! Also, Peter does not call on the other disciples to witness for him or think his own word might be accepted – this latter had already been discredited. No, Peter calls on Christ himself to be his witness.

Jesus makes no adverse comment on Peter's lesser affirmation of his love for him, on the contrary he commissions Peter to service to him saying "feed my lambs or young Christians". This task of feeding and nurturing to which Peter has been called is clearly one of the most important duties in ministry. Jesus can confidently commission Peter and restore him to service in the kingdom because Peter has matured

through his awful humbling experience and now has a more realistic idea of his abilities.

In verse 16 of our reading, Jesus again asks Peter if Peter *agapeo* loves Jesus, but this time without asking if this love is more than the love of the other disciples. Again Peter simply replies that he *phileo* loves Jesus. Here Jesus is not only recapitulating the second of Peter's denials by making him offer a second affirmation of love, but making sure that Peter has truly recognised where he is in his Christian development. It is far better for each one of us to be completely honest with God about our love for him and our commitment to him. After all he sees the truth in our hearts! Again, Jesus simply accepts Peter's lesser expression of his love and commissions him for the second time saying "take care of my sheep". Having first asked him to care for new Christians Jesus now asks Peter to take care of the sheep, the mature Christians. It is clear that as Peter makes it clearer and clearer that he has really learnt the folly of his over-emphatic and over-enthusiastic commitments, Jesus increases his trust and reliance on him. Again, let that be a lesson to us to be completely realistic in our commitments to Jesus and to service in his kingdom.

Finally, in verse 17 Jesus asks Peter for the third time if he loves him, completing the recapitulation of Peter's earlier three-fold denial of Jesus. However, this time Jesus lowers the target for Peter. He asks Peter not if he *agapeo* loves him, but if he *phileo* loves him, thus coming down to the level of Peter's previous affirmations. Now Peter is grieved. He is grieved not so much because Jesus has continued to question him, but because his Lord has had to reduce the required affirmation to his, Peter's, level. This highlighted his limitation in loving His Saviour who did so much and who suffered so much for him. But, it was an awakening experience, one that was of particular value to Peter and which would later give birth to greater degrees of spiritual growth and service. In any event, Peter was not so grieved that he was unable to repeat his affirmation of his *phileo* love for Jesus for the third time. Jesus then commissions him for the third time at the end of verse 17 – "feed my sheep". Now Peter is being

told to feed not new Christians but mature Christians. A high calling indeed. I would suggest that this is an indication of Jesus' confidence in Peter's new found Christian maturity.

In verse 18 Jesus then goes on to tell Peter that although he was not ready to follow Jesus unto death at the time of Jesus' own crucifixion, he will now continue to grow in his commitment and faith and will one day be ready to follow Jesus to death on a cross. I believe it was necessary for Peter first to be humbled, so that he could arrive in that place where he was ready to look at himself and his abilities honestly and admit his limitations and failings, before our Father, through the infusing of His Holy Spirit, could build on a now solid foundation to make Peter an extremely important and influential leader in the early church. Indeed the rock upon which the church was built according to the Roman Catholic church.

So the first lesson today is that Christ will always forgive us our sins if we just accept him where we are as our Lord and saviour. The second lesson is that we need to have our own personal encounter with Jesus, just like Peter did in the events we've been looking at together this morning, in order for that forgiveness and the subsequent recommissioning to be worked out. The third lesson is that we must be completely honest with Jesus recognising fully our own awful limitations and sinfulness before God can take us and use us in His service in spite of our weakness and failure. Only in our acknowledgement of our weakness can we be made strong in God's own strength. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:10 "For when I am weak, then I am strong".

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Heavenly Father we thank you that you forgive us in our failure and can always restore us and recommission us in your service if we just turn to you accepting You as our Lord and saviour. Father, let us always be completely honest and realistic concerning our love for you and our commitment to your kingdom. May you take that base of honesty and build upon that solid foundation through the infusing of your Holy Spirit to equip us and build us into the soldiers and servants for You that we never thought we could be. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord Amen.