

Peter's re-commissioning: 'To follow is to love'

Sermon by The Reverend Hannah Higginson at All Saints Church
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Bible Reading: John 21v1-19

Not long after Easter we find the disciples back on the shores of Lake Galilee. They've seen the empty tomb and they've encountered the risen Jesus in the upper room in Jerusalem. He's shown them his hands and his side and they have rejoiced (John 20). And yet. Here we find them back in Galilee, back to the familiar and the safe. It's as though they have lost their identity as disciples. They have forgotten their calling. They are struggling with what comes next.

And so, as they return to the shore after a frustrating night of no fish, Jesus comes to them. And we find details reminding us, and them, of their first encounter with Jesus: the calling of Simon, James and John as detailed in Luke ch5. On that occasion they had also had a difficult night with no fish, Jesus told them to let down their nets so they did, and again caught such an abundance of fish that their nets were near breaking point. It was through that encounter that they came to leave everything and followed Jesus. It seems that in these days following Jesus' death and resurrection they were in need of that reminder, of why they became Jesus' disciples.

And then as disciples come ashore, there is a charcoal fire – the only other time a charcoal fire is mentioned in the gospels is in the courtyard of the High Priest where Peter denies three times that he is a disciple of Jesus. The visual aids shift to remind them of that night when he was arrested. There on the lakeside, Jesus shares bread and fish with his disciples. It may not be bread and wine they are sharing but the implication is that this meal is Eucharistic, the language is reminiscent of that last supper, 'Jesus took the bread and gave it to them'; and as they share breakfast we read, 'they knew it was the Lord'.

And so the disciples are reminded of their identity as Jesus' followers.

And then the attention shifts to Peter, and Jesus speaks with him to not only remind him of his calling and his identity as one of Jesus' disciples, but he also commissions him anew – with a new role and a new purpose. And Jesus begins

by addressing him as Simon – his name of course, but it jars because Jesus gave Simon a new name – Peter, on this rock I will build my church. To go back to addressing him as Simon reinforces this idea that Peter is struggling with his identity as a disciple.

Jesus then goes on to ask Simon 3 times, 'do you love me?'. You may have heard it noted that in the Greek there are 3 different words for love - eros, philos and agape. It is the words *philos* and *agape* used in this passage, *philos* speaks of a love between friends and *agape* of a higher love, often used for the love that God has for us, or that we are called to have for God. What's interesting is that whilst Jesus asks Peter, 'do you *agape* me?' and Peter responds 'yes lord I *philos* you' – on the third question Jesus changes his word to say, 'do you *philos* me?' and Peter once again responds 'yes I *philos* you'. Jesus doesn't move Peter from a *philos* love to this higher form of *agape* love, in fact they end on *philos*. And this perhaps tells us something very significant about the love of friends. It is in no sense an inferior love. Jesus has already said in John 15, 'I do not call you servants, but friends' and 'greater love (*agape*) has no one than to lay down his life for his friends (*philos*)'.

Jesus here places great importance on the love that is shown within friendship, this kind of community love, between neighbours and crucially, Christian brothers and sisters. For Peter's commissioning in this passage is fundamentally based on love and care for others. He is no longer called to be a fisher of men, or people, but he is called to be a shepherd. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

We are reminded here of Jesus' commandment given at the last supper - love one another. We can easily become numb to those words which are so familiar to us, but here is shown that love is absolutely foundational in the church. The word church means a gathered community and as a gathered community we are called to show love and to care for one another. This is something we will witness as we read through the book of Acts and the work of the very early church in the next few weeks. It was all about caring for and supporting each other as they spread the good news of God.

Jesus said to his disciples, (Jn13v35) 'by this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'. I wonder if this is something that the church is known for? How do you feel as a member of the church community? Are we a loving community? Do you feel loved? Do you show love?

An important way in which this love expresses itself is in pastoral care for one another. Pastoral care is something that this church takes very seriously but it is also something that we are all responsible for. We may have a pastoral care team who visit the sick and isolated, but they cannot know who those people are unless we all have our eyes and ears open to the needs around us. We may have a prayer ministry team to listen and pray with people but that is not to stop anyone here offering a kind and listening ear to a neighbour, and a prayer, either silently or aloud. We may have safeguarding officers but that does not mean that we should not all be aware of keeping each other safe and looking out for one another.

Just as Jesus commissions Peter with love, so we too are reminded that God calls each of us to love, and to show that love through the care and support we offer to others. Our church is our family – how can we better love and support and care for each other within this community of faith?

Follow me, Jesus says, to each of us. And love one another. Amen.