

Sermon, April 14, 2024

John 21:15-19
"Jesus and Peter"

Along with his brother Andrew, Peter (also known as Simon), was Jesus' first pick for discipleship. A fisherman by trade he was obviously very intrigued by Jesus, choosing to forego his nets and follow him throughout Jesus' ministry. This does not mean that his discipleship was without problems.

In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is, and then who the disciples themselves think he is, and Peter is the very first person to confess Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus replies to this declaration, saying, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven... But then, Jesus says to the disciples that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again". Peter takes exception to this, pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him for saying such a thing, at which point Jesus replies, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things". For Peter, a brief moment of revelation, only crashing down later in not believing the words of the one he just identified as the Messiah.

But in the very next chapter Peter is one of the three disciples that Jesus takes with him up on a high mountain where they witness the transfiguration. Clearly, Jesus continues to see something in Peter, which he had seen when he first called him to follow.

But this is not the end of Peter's problems. On the night of Jesus' arrest, he says that before the cock crows Peter will deny him three times. Peter vehemently denies this, but after Jesus is taken away various people accuse him of being a follower of Jesus, and just as Jesus had predicted, Peter denied knowing him three times.

This is where today's reading comes in. Following the resurrection Peter is confronted by the Risen Christ who asks him three times if he loves him. Peter's feelings are hurt by this questioning, but it must have suddenly dawned on him that being asked three times if he loved Jesus mirrors the three times, he denied knowing him. Jesus then reveals the fact that Peter will eventually be put to death. (Historically, Peter will also be crucified, but by his own request, feeling not worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus, he was crucified upside-down,) Jesus then concludes by saying, "Follow me" - the first words he had spoken to Peter on the shores of Galilee. This was undoubtedly the final test of Peter's love. Would he still be willing to follow knowing what it would lead to?

I find Peter one of more interesting figures in the Bible, and one whom I think many can easily identify with, not because he is a spotless type of saint; but because of his true humanity, filled with both faith and doubts, with cowardice eventually replaced by courageousness. And what is truly enlightening is the fact that despite his ups and downs Jesus still saw him as the Rock upon which he would build his church and hand him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Anne to this day the Popes of the Catholic Church are referred to as the successor of Peter.

A former girlfriend of mine, who was not a Christian, challenged me once asking if I was willing to die for my faith. I said that I like to think that I would, but I can't say so with absolute certainty, because I don't think anyone can really say yes until they find themselves actually in that situation. To say undeniably yes in the comfort of one's home, not faced with the possibility, is just exaggerated pride. We can only pray that should such a possibility arise we may find the faith and courage to say yes.

I look to Peter as inspiration because I am not a spotless saint, that I have had times of doubt and times when I was not as faithful as I could be yet seeing that this does not exclude me from God's circle of love, that as imperfect human beings we are all still recipients of divine grace. If there ever was someone who was perfect and unflinching in his faith, he died on a cross two thousand years ago.

Notice that each time Jesus questions Peter's love and Peter answers "Yes", Jesus then tells him to feed and tend his lambs and sheep, followed up by saying "Follow me". To truly express our love for Jesus means that we have to follow his example. To express our love in worship through prayer and song has its place, but we fully show our love through the love we show to others, especially those in need. Jesus makes it very clear in the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew that when we serve others, we are truly serving him, and when we are serving him, we are truly loving him. And following him also means that we live lives of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Put simply, to follow him by serving others is to love him. Amen.

Let us pray: We praise you, O God, , that by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have delivered us from the power of death, making us alive to serve you by following your Son. Free us from pride of self that we may live in community with one another and with all people. Free us from fear of the principalities and powers of this world that we may live and speak with courage guided by your Spirit. Keep us rooted and grounded in your love and fill us with the power of your Spirit. Be glorified in our life together through Jesus our risen Savior. Amen.