

## **Do you love me? (John 21:1-19) – Encounters with Jesus 10: Peter**

*Often to show things are definite and certain they are said or done three times. In this epilogue to John's gospel not only does Jesus certify his resurrection by appearing for the third time to his disciples, but he has a three-fold conversation with Jesus to undo Peter's three-fold denial.*

### **Three times...**

If something unexpected happens once, it can be dismissed as an exception.

If something unexpected happens twice, it can be seen as a rare coincidence.

If it happens three times, then it can no longer be dismissed as chance.

In the same way, to say something three times is to emphasise that this is something that is absolutely, unarguably and emphatically definite.

We see these principle of three times in all kinds of ways:

- Lionel Richie's 'You are once, twice, three times a lady...'
- Tony Blair, 1997 Priorities for office: "Education, education, education..."
- Baseball: Three times and you are out...
- Going.... Going... gone!

And we see the same principle at work in John 21.

### **The Third Resurrection Appearance - vs. 1-14**

We see it first of all at work in verses 1-14. This we are told was the third appearance of Jesus. As the third appearance, particularly one in a very different setting to the first two - in Galilee on a beach, rather than in Jerusalem in a room, helps to confirm to the disciples the truth and reality of Jesus's resurrection.

But, Jesus wants to do more here than just confirm to the disciples the reality of his resurrection. There is unfinished business and loose ends to tie up, especially with Simon Peter. So I want to focus on Peter's encounter with Jesus in verse 15-19, one that involves a conversation that is repeated three times...

### **Peter, the Back Story:**

To help us understand what is going on with Jesus's conversation with Peter, we need to review the back story as it is put in John's gospel. Jesus asks Peter, three times, 'Do you love me?' It is a powerful question in its own right, but in the context of John's gospel and Jesus's death it has even more power.

In particular just before he was arrested, tried and executed Jesus said this to his disciples:

"Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Loves' greatest expression comes in laying down your life for those you love. And this is what Jesus had come to do. All the way back in John 10, Jesus had talked about 'laying down his life for others.'

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

And he repeats the point a couple of other times in the same chapter. He was of course talking about his death on the cross, but at the time this would not have been clear to the disciples who

certainly would not want to believe that Jesus would be horribly executed! Notice that this verse also links with this conversation and Jesus talking as the good shepherd wanting Peter to care for his sheep!

Then just after Jesus had washed the disciples feet as a symbolic demonstration of how his death on the cross was going to be an act of service to the disciples, Jesus tells his disciples:

"Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." (John 13:36)

Jesus is of course again talking about his now imminent death on the cross. Peter does not understand, he senses that sacrifice is involved, but wants to offer his own sacrifice first:

"Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."" (John 13:37)

Notice Peter's words echo Jesus's words in John 10: 'lay down... life... for.' And Jesus picks up these words in his prophetic response:

"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!" (John 13:38)

Of course in John 18, after Jesus has been arrested and while he is still on trial in the court of the High Priest, Peter does what Jesus says. He denies even knowing Jesus three times. It must have felt like, 'thou strikes and he was out'. Far from laying down his life for Jesus, when the chips were down he had proved his inability to even accept that he belonged to Jesus.

This then is the back story for Peter and it is this backstory that Jesus is dealing with in this conversation.

### **Peter's Encounter with Jesus - 21:15-19**

But to Peter's three-strikes and he was out, Jesus initiates an encounter that gives Peter a three-fold affirmation that he is most certainly in with Jesus.

In each of the three parts, there are three elements that are repeated. Jesus asks a question: "Do you love me?" Peter gives an answer and Jesus commissions Peter to care for his sheep. Let's look at each element in turn:

#### **The 3-fold Question: Love of Jesus**

This is such a simple, but such a powerful and profound question. This passage is all about reinstating Peter to have a leading role in the church. Jesus is the good shepherd, we are the sheep and Peter is being asked by Jesus to look after the sheep to act as a kind of under-shepherd as Peter will describe it in his own letter later in the Bible. But what qualifies Peter for this role?

Jesus implies that one crucial thing matters: does Peter love Jesus.

I have to say that in all the interviews I've had to be ordained or become a vicar no-one has asked me whether I love Jesus. Yet, perhaps they should have done. Surely, this is the foundational question of anyone who would take up leadership within the church?

We can so easily lose sight of this and put other important aspects of church life as foundational: a desire to hold to Biblical truth, a love of musical worship, a passion for mission, care for the struggling in the church. Yet, all these need to be built on the firm foundation of love of Jesus.

- When we love Jesus, we will want to hold to Biblical truth, because the Bible points to him as the way, the truth and the life.
- When we love Jesus, then we will want to praise him and his Father in worship of all kinds.
- When we love Jesus, then we will want to reach out with his gospel of grace, because he died on the cross to draw the whole world to himself.
- When we love Jesus we will want to care for others in the church, because Jesus died to save them as well.

But, remember that great love means being willing to sacrifice. "Greater love has no-one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13). Jesus's very last words to Peter bring this home. Peter said he wanted to follow Jesus, when Jesus was preparing to go to the cross. Jesus said he couldn't follow him then, but he would in the future.

Now Jesus lays out what following Jesus will mean for Peter. When he is old, he will stretch out his hands, be bound and led where he does not want to go. This may be a reference to crucifixion, where people stretch out their hands, which are then tied a cross beam and they are led out to be crucified. Tradition has it that Peter was crucified in Rome about 30 years after the resurrection, when he would indeed have been an old man. Jesus is clear with Peter, that his love will lead to him laying down his life for Jesus - but not for a long time yet! He has a lot of sheep caring to do first.

Then Jesus finally says to Peter, "Follow me!"

We need to ask ourselves the question, do we love Jesus. Do we love Jesus enough to lay down our lives for him? For most if not all of us, this will not mean dying for Jesus, but to follow Jesus does mean to make sacrifices. If we are not willing to sacrifice for Jesus, then do we really love him? And if we don't love him then are we ready to serve him in whatever way he calls us?

### **The 3-fold answer: Humility before Jesus**

Along with the question we have Peter's three-fold answer. I think it is important to notice how Peter answers the question, because it shows the lessons Peter has learnt. In particular he has learnt humility before Jesus.

Notice that in the first question, Jesus says to Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" By that Jesus is probably meaning, "Do you love me more than the other disciples?" In a way Peter has shown that he does. After all only he jumps out of the boat to see Jesus, only he obeys Jesus and pulls in the fish.

Yet, Jesus's past arrogance has been tamed. In the other gospels, he says when Jesus tells them they will be scattered that, "Even if all fall away, I will not!" (Mark 14:29). Yet, Peter was

proved wrong. He was just like the others - if not worse. He did fall away and worse than that he denied Jesus three times.

Now he realises it is not about what he has achieved for Jesus, it is not about Peter laying down his life for Jesus, but Jesus laying down his life for Peter and all the sheep. It is not about Peter showing he is in some way better than the other disciples. Such comparisons no longer matter. Peter has been humbled by the recent events.

But, perhaps more importantly, Peter has come to accept that Jesus knows best. Back in chapter 13, Peter challenged Jesus washing their feet, he challenged Jesus saying that he could not follow him. But then Jesus predicted that he would deny him three times and what Jesus said came true. Simon Peter, came to realise that Jesus knew Peter far better than Peter knew himself. He even says at the end, "Lord you know all things!" Peter did not need to show Jesus his love, he did not need to prove himself to Jesus, Jesus knew all about Peter. He knew what was inside Peter's heart.

But in accepting that Jesus knows all, Peter also accepts that Jesus knows best. So many approach Christianity as though they know best, as though they have the ability to decide which part of God's word should be accepted and which parts discarded. They will only come to Jesus as they understand him rather than seek to encounter the real Jesus revealed in the Bible. Like Peter we need to learn humility before Jesus, if we are to truly serve him.

### **The 3-fold commission: Confidence in Jesus's grace and calling**

To serve Jesus, we need to love him and we need to be humble before him, but we also need to be confident in his grace and calling.

After each of Peter's answers, Jesus commissions Peter to look after his flock. This was a specific calling for Peter to take on a leadership role in the church.

Yet, implied in this calling is Jesus's grace. The three-fold calling comes after Peter's three-fold denial. The commission shows that Jesus has forgiven Peter for his failing, that his past failing is not a bar to his future service. It is a calling founded not on personal achievement but God's grace.

Whatever role Jesus may call us to, let us remember that we come to it not because we have proved ourselves to God, but because God has graciously accepted us despite our failings, through the forgiveness won by Jesus on the cross.

And notice how the calling is put: 'feed or care for my sheep or lambs'. The sheep of course refer to the church. The people who belong to Jesus as the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for them. This is where love of Jesus and humility before Jesus are so important in Christian leadership. When we are called to lead others in the church, we must remember that this is a call to look after those who belong to Jesus, those who Jesus died for. If we love Jesus, then we will love those he loved so greatly that he laid down his life for them. If we are humble before Jesus, then we will want to look after them by pointing them to Jesus and encouraging them to have confidence in his grace and teaching. This is what it means to care for or feed Jesus's sheep.

**Your encounter with Jesus?**

Peter was transformed in this encounter with Jesus from a failed disciple of a crucified teacher to a faithful servant of a resurrected Lord. How does encountering Jesus through the words of John's gospel transform you?

Have you learnt to love Jesus as the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for you?

Have you been humbled to see that Jesus knows you better than you know yourself and that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life?

Are you willing to serve Jesus through caring for his sheep in whatever way Jesus calls you to do?