

Do you love me more than these?

Third Sunday of Easter – Cycle C – 5 May 2019

Readings: Acts 5:27b-32, 40b-41; Rev 5:11-14; Jn 21:1-19

“Jesus said to Simon Peter: ‘Do you love me more than these?’” (Jn)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The main character of last Sunday’s reading was Apostle Thomas. This Sunday the focus shifts to Simon Peter—and, by extension, to all Jesus’s disciples, including you and me. The events around the Passover were too sad, shocking, and perhaps even shameful for Peter and Jesus’ apostles. Despite Jesus’ warnings and Peter’s claims to loyalty and fearlessness, Peter had denied Jesus not only once, but thrice! Peter’s “I am going fishing!” announcement seems to be some sort of reparatory move to drown his sorrow and shame into the immense sea, so to say. More than preaching and teaching, Peter was most adept in his original occupation: fishing. But, the entire exercise was fishless and fruitless. On Jesus’ bidding: “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some [fish],” they do so. Evangelist John—storyteller par excellence—narrates: “*Simon Peter went* aboard and dragged the net to the shore, full of big fish, *153 of them*; and in spite of there being so many *the net was not broken*.” Notice that, in another fishing narrative where Peter is main character, i.e., Lk 5:1-11, due to Jesus’ advice, they haul in so huge a catch that “their nets were *beginning to break*.” Early Christian thinkers observed that, though the two scenes seem similar, the post-resurrection scene signifies the ‘new catch’ that Peter will draw in where the nets will not break. The number ‘153’ is symbolic and signifies the number of nations known to exist at that time. The fishing episode in Luke’s gospel ends with: “Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people!’” (Lk 5:10). Indeed, Peter will now begin a new fishing profession as Shepherd.
2. Mission is fruitful only when flowing from the greatest of Christ’s commands: “love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus asks Peter: “Do you love me more than these?” Three points are noteworthy. [a] Peter is not only asked whether he loves Jesus, but whether he loves Jesus “more than *these*”. The ‘*these*’ can be interpreted as those standing around (other apostles) or everyone and everything dearest to Peter. [b] Embarrassed though Peter is that he should be asked this question *thrice, publicly*, Jesus repeats this question *thrice, publicly*, not because Jesus doubts Peter’s love, but because He wants Peter to replace his triple public denial with a triple public profession of love. [c] Jesus’ first two questions use the word *agape* {highest form of love}, while his third question and all three of Peter’s responses use the word *philia* {regular love between friends}. This indicates that Jesus comes down to Peter’s level and is ready to accept any measure of love. Anyway, each profession of love leads to a commissioning: “Feed my lambs / sheep!” Love must lead to mission. No love, no mission!

3. Peter's love—after total acceptance and forgiveness by Jesus—is seen not merely in words but also in his works and witnessing to Christ's life, death and resurrection. Thus, in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, even after being arrested and warned to stop preaching, Peter boldly declares, "We must obey God rather than men!" Peter will suffer greatly, be flogged, chained and finally crucified head downward for this. The last line in the reading is striking: "As they (apostles) left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name (of Jesus)."

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme: In the 5th chapter of the Book of Revelation, the seer John sees thousands of living creatures and angels singing: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!" Worthy—the Greek *axios*—was a popular political term in the Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire. Just as today we would say: "Hail!" or "Zindabad!" to salute any big leader, so in the first centuries the crowds would shout, "Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!" when the Roman emperor appeared in public. Here, the shouts are for someone who is much more powerful than the Roman emperor: The crucified-resurrected Lord Jesus. Lamb is one of the favorite titles for Jesus in the book of Revelation. The Lamb remains always the crucified one, even when he is also the resurrected one and the Lord of the world. There is no path to honour, glory and worthiness—just as there is no road to Easter—that does not pass through the cross.

Two Signposts from Church Tradition:

A Detail from Early Church Tradition: The symbolism of fish is so rich that, from the earliest years of Christianity, it was the secret means of signifying one's membership in Christ. The Greek equivalent of 'fish' is *IXTUS*, which was the abbreviation meaning: "Jesus, The Christ, Saviour, Son of God." Even today, the Pope seals papal decrees and ordinances with the 'Ring of the Fisherman'!

Saint Pope John Paul II: "The Risen One asks Peter the question that will determine his whole life: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' (Jn 21:16). Jesus does not ask him what his talents, gifts and skills are. Nor does he ask the one who had just denied him whether from now on he will be faithful to him, whether he will stand firm. He asks him the only thing that matters, the one thing that can give a vocation its foundation: 'Do you love me?' Today Christ is asking each of you: 'Do you love me?' He is not asking you whether you know how to speak to crowds, whether you can direct an organization or manage an estate. He asks you to love him. All else will ensue. Indeed, walking in Jesus' footsteps is not immediately expressed in things to do or say, but first of all in loving him, in staying with him, in totally accepting him into one's life. Today you are giving Jesus' question a sincere answer. Some will be able to say with Peter: 'Lord; you know that I love you!' Others will say: 'Lord, you know how I would like to love you; teach me to love you, to be able to follow you'. The important thing is to stay on the path, to continue the journey without losing sight of the goal, until the day when you will be able to say wholeheartedly: 'You know that I love you!'"
