

A bit too personal?

Acts 9¹⁻⁶; Psalm 30; Revelation 5^{11-end}; John 21¹⁻¹⁹

Do you love me more than these? [John 21¹⁵]

What a great set of readings when you have both the challenge to Peter after Jesus had cooked breakfast for them (who could forget Bishop Rowan Williams speaking in our Parish about Jesus first words to his Disciples, **Come and have breakfast**, and the importance of food in the mission of the Church?) and the challenge to Paul, hell-bent on eradicating the new cult of Jesus' followers.

The point is clear – following Jesus is an intensely personal thing. However important the Church is as a Christian Community - for nurturing growth and love and learning – it doesn't replace the need for our own response to and relationship with Jesus!

These two stories of Paul and Peter are so telling:

Saul was clear in his mission – to eradicate the followers of **the Way** (as Christians were first called). He did things properly. **He went to the High Priest** and got the documents that allowed him to persecute the Christians in **Damascus**.

You can imagine the conversation amongst the group of fanatics that must have accompanied Saul – none of it pleasant! How surprised they must have been to hear (because **they heard the voice but saw no-one**) Jesus say to Saul, **Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?** The voice wasn't recognisable, nor the **light** that danced around Saul: **who are you, Lord?** Then the shock when they voice replied, **I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting**.

That personal encounter with Jesus changed Saul, even his name, as he became Paul. In the irony of the unfolding God's plan, Paul the devoutly Orthodox Jew, becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles and

heralds their inclusion in the Kingdom of Faith that is the Church. Eventually, as Caligula becomes Emperor in 37AD, Paul is beheaded for his faith.

Our conversion may not have had flashing lights or voices from heaven, but it will have involved a meeting with Jesus and our response to his invitation to receive forgiveness and to follow him. There are no family rates or group bookings!

- ✘ The passage in John makes my feeble attempts to learn Greek worthwhile.

The disciples had gone back to what they had known after the shock of the death and the rumoured resurrection of Jesus. I am sure that those with sufficient knowledge could read PTSD into their actions. They went **fishing**. They didn't recognise the figure on the shore at daybreak. Their enquiry about the catch rings true with any familiar with the fishing industry. When the invitation came, **cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some**, it could have been some knowledge of the water or even a superstition. The result was that **they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish**. The penny dropped for Peter: **It is the Lord!** Ever mindful of the needs of others, Jesus had the fire ready and issues the invitation, **come and have breakfast**. **Bread** was shared as the Eucharist is at the heart of any post-resurrection meeting with Christ.

Then comes the question put to Peter three times: In the Greek it is a strange sequence (with *'αγαπε* as the highest form of selfless love and *φιλεω* being the love between people, brotherly love). Jesus says, **Simon, son of John do you love 'αγαπε me more than these?** Peter replies, **Yes, Lord; you know that I love φιλεω you**. This is followed by the command, **Feed my lambs**. The second time, the exchange is, **Simon, Son of John, do you love 'αγαπε me?** with the reply, **Yes, Lord; you know that I love φιλεω you**, with the command, **tend my sheep**. The third time is slightly different. **Simon Son of John, do you love φιλεω me?** This time it records, **Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, Do you love me?** So the reply was, **Lord,**

you know everything; you know that I love *φιλεω* **you** and this time it is followed with **Feed my sheep** before the prediction that Peter will die, as he did I 33AD.

The traditional explanation is that Jesus reduces '*αγαπε* that supreme selfless love to *φιλεω* brotherly love, which explains Peter's offence. However, I think that the exchange is Peter resisting any general love in '*αγαπε* and in using *φιλεω* he is making the point that it is Jesus whom he loves. The offence was when Jesus questions that personal commitment. The three-fold denial at Jesus trial reversed by the three-fold affirmation, even if that means death because of their personal relationship.

I am acutely aware that I begin my last three months as Rector of this wonderful Parish today. As I must use these next weeks to prepare you for whatever happens next, so this is the essential foundation on which we build.

Never doubting that Jesus loves us (I am not sure here whether to be theologically accurate and say that Jesus is the fullest expression of the love of God the Father, expressed definitively on the cross and demonstrated decisively in the resurrection and confirmed to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit, or simply to sing the Sunday School song, *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*) the Church is a community of people 'in love' with Jesus. If it is genuine, this will be an infectious and contagious love that permeates all we are and all we do. God takes salvation personally and so should we!