

The Lakeside (3) – John 21: 15 – 19



During the lockdown, many people have come to value the opportunity to get out for a daily walk in the fresh air. After breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter to come for a walk, not for exercise, but so they could have a private conversation.

This was a conversation Simon Peter must have been dreading! As he sat with Jesus and the other disciples around the fire he would have recalled how, not long ago, seated by another fire in the High Priest's courtyard, he had three times denied that he even knew Jesus. The hardest person to forgive is oneself, and I can imagine Simon Peter feeling he could never forgive himself for letting down his Lord so badly.

Now, as they walked side by side, Jesus did not refer directly to Simon's denials, but instead asked him, three times, "Do you love me?" English translations miss the difference in the word for "love" used by Jesus and the weaker word used by Simon Peter. In the original Greek of St John's Gospel, Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" and Simon Peter replies, in effect, "Yes, Lord, you know I am your friend." All Simon's old boastfulness and bravado are gone, and he dare not claim more than that.

The third time, though, when Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Simon Peter can restrain himself no longer. He answers, "Lord, you know everything: you know that I love you." He recognises that Jesus knows just how much he really loves Him.

In response to Simon's replies, each time Jesus gives him an instruction: "Feed my lambs", "Feed my sheep," and again, "Feed my sheep." In the past, Jesus had called Himself "the good shepherd", and compared Himself with the hired hand who does not really care about the sheep and who runs away once any danger looms (John 10: 11 – 18). Simon Peter must have felt he had behaved just like that when he felt threatened in the High Priest's courtyard and swore he did not know his Lord.

Now, however, here was Jesus, saying, in effect, "Simon, I am entrusting the care of my people to you. I won't be physically present in the world to look after them, so from now on you are to be their shepherd."

Jesus did not just forgive Simon Peter; He reinstated him. He did not say, "I forgive you, but don't expect me to entrust to you any task that requires courage." Instead, He gave him the tremendous responsibility of leadership in His Church, a responsibility in which Simon Peter would, in time, prove faithful unto death.

Maybe there are things about yourself that you find hard to forgive. Be assured that if you are truly sorry, God in Christ has forgiven you already. He died that we might be forgiven. Believe that is true, put the past behind you and let Him direct your future, because He also died to make us good.

A prayer:

*My trespass was grown up to heaven:
but, far above the skies,
in Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see your mercies rise.*

*The depth of all-redeeming love
what angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
the gift unspeakable.*

(Singing the Faith 436)

Picture: Raphael: Christ's charge to Peter.