

3rd Sunday of Easter—April 10, 2016

Today's Gospel reading from John, like so many of his readings, focuses on love. But it presents some interesting perspectives that might help think about this central concept in our lives.

Last Sunday, Father Richard helped us imagine what it must have been like for Jesus coming back to find the apostles hiding out in a locked room.

He presented a Jesus who understood their fears, but nevertheless encouraged the apostles to go forth and preach the good news.

Today's Gospel gives us an account of the third encounter between Jesus and the apostles after the resurrection.

The apostles have left the confines of their locked room, and appear to have resumed some aspects of the normal life they had led before they met Jesus. They are fishing.

Jesus is, one again, patient and understanding – he gives them a very useful fishing tip that pays off with a net full of fish.

But he is equally determined that they should pursue a new line of work.

So he shifts the conversation to a question about whether Peter loves him.

Why a question about love? And why Peter?

Have you ever asked somebody if they love you?

It's a potentially dangerous question. It's rather presumptuous. Why would you ask the question unless you hoped or expected the answer to be yes?

A negative answer is likely to be very disappointing, if not devastating.

And does the question presuppose the questioner loves the person they are asking?

Asking someone whether they love you is asking about the deepest, most fundamental relationship possible. It's not about whether someone likes you, or can work with you or wants to spend time with you.

It's about love: which encompasses so much more. It's about a depth of commitment that is unparalleled, that is unconditional.

The question may also be hard for the recipient to answer. It can be disarming and may raise further questions about what sort of love the questioner has in mind and why the question is being asked.

I would guess that the question "do you love me" does not get asked very often. Far less often than the statement "I love you" is spoken.

So what can we understand about this question from the mouth of Jesus to Peter?

Peter answers without hesitation: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus then asks him to “feed my lambs”. So the love that Jesus asks of Peter is tied to Jesus’s mission, to nourishing the flock of followers that has already begun to form.

Loving Jesus is here expressed in terms of continuing his work of good news and salvation. It isn’t just an emotion or a feeling. It commands action.

And the first reading from Acts reminds us that feeding lambs was not necessarily a relaxing pastoral idyll. It would incur the wrath of the authorities and ultimately lead Peter to his death.

The Gospel story does not end with a single question. Jesus asks the question again. Peter gives the same answer.

And then Jesus asks the question a third time. At this point, Peter begins to betray his humanity. His answer has a tone of annoyance and the Gospel says he was hurt – “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you”. The third time also recalls the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. The question strikes a nerve. But it does not shake Peter’s love.

If anything, it strengthens his love, recalling how he almost lost Jesus and now loves him all the more.

I used to think Peter was not the greatest of apostles. He seemed to be the one who got on Jesus’s wrong side. He cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant. He denied Jesus repeatedly. He was the one who always had to answer the questions, like a poor student who annoys the teacher in school.

But the more I reflect on Peter, the more I think he was so much like us. He made mistakes. He gave simple answers. He let his emotions get to him.

And the more I see him as a model for us all in loving Jesus more than anything.

Is this why Jesus picked him to lead the apostles? Is this why the Pope is his successor?

We don’t normally associate the Pope with someone who has human frailties. Papal infallibility does not sit well with these things.

And yet, today we have a Pope who really seems to live what Peter was about, who is sensitive to what it is to be human, who puts compassion before so many other things, who isn’t afraid to ask questions.

And last Friday, he wrote a letter to us all about the family. He entitled it the Joy of Love.

I am pretty sure Pope Francis has thought about Jesus's questions to Peter. And I wonder what these questions mean for us too. I don't think they were addressed only to Peter.

Do you love me?

Don't answer too quickly. Think about it. And answer from your heart.

JMK