

“Feed My Sheep”

3 May 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship:

Good morning everybody. Thank you for joining with us as we worship God together. In a moment, we are going to sing from Psalm 100, which I sang so many times when worshipping God in my home church in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim. It speaks of God as a Shepherd of His people, and it speaks of Him as a Creator, and of His goodness and love through all generations. The image of a shepherd is one that endures through all cultures and to all generations. And so as we sing, *All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice*, let us praise God.

Praise: IPH Psalm 100 - All People That On Earth Do Dwell

Prayers of Adoration and Confession:

Father, we look at nature around us - the bright morning sunshine, the trees with their new leaves gently flapping in the breeze, the birds twittering their song - and it lifts our mood. Something inside us just knows this is good. This is the natural world singing its song of praise to our Heavenly Creator. Lord, we confess that we have turned life into a treadmill of busyness and allowed things, perfectly good things, to dominate our thoughts and priorities, and to push You out. Father, forgive us. With the COVID restrictions, our man made world has been forced to slow down and, in the quietness, many are noticing birdsong for the first time. Lord, we pray that in this quietness we will hear Your still small voice all the more clearly, some for the first time. May we just know this is the Good Shepherd and follow You, for You provide all we need. We thank you, Father, that when we do follow, when we come inside Your gates and we put our dependency on You, You provide comfort. When we enter Your courts, we submit to Your will, You lead us on the best path. Father, You have worked for the good of those who love You from the time of Adam to the present day, and will continue to do so. May Your kingdom come. Amen.

Reading: John 21:15-25

Sermon:

Thank you, Rebecca for reading for us today. If you have your Bibles nearby, do open them at John's Gospel, Ch. 21 v 15-25.

Last night, I watched The Late Late Show, and Ryan Tubridy asked An Taoiseach so many questions about our present situation, and particularly what it would be like into the future. Our present difficulties have, indeed, asked, encouraged us to ask important questions - profound questions. And one which I've heard, which I like, is: how can we make our society more equitable? That's a good question, an important question.

And today, we are going to look at a very important question, a question that anyone needs to ask if they are in any relationship and they want that relationship to be good and to work. "Do you love me?" That's a question that Peter is asked by Jesus. In fact, he's asked it three times:

1. Do you truly love me more than these? (v. 15)
2. Do you truly love me? (v. 16)
3. Do you love me? (v. 17)

Peter, as we know, had previously declared his 100% commitment to Jesus: "Even if all fall away on account of You, I never will" (Matthew 26:33) he told the disciples. But sadly, Peter failed Jesus, denied he knew Him, cursed His name and ran away. Peter's relationship with Jesus had been broken. There is a barrier and he is aware of it, and it's likely that the incident previous to this, with the miraculous catch of fish, has reminded him of that, both of his failure and his sinfulness and his commitment to Jesus. (Luke 5:8)

When someone asks you the question, "Do you love me?", that's not an easy question to answer, is it? It requires that we examine ourselves, that we're honest with ourselves. And maybe, when we think about that question, we think, "Well, I'm not sure if I really love that person." Or, I'm saying, "Well, it's more complicated, messier, I'm unsure of that. Or, perhaps, we just don't know what's going on in our hearts at all, because it's a question that gets to our heart.

So, Peter and Jesus, at this point, have finished eating their wonderful meal of fish and bread. It appears that they are walking along a beach together. The other disciples are around, John is not far away (the one who has written this account), but it does seem to be a reasonably private conversation. And I want to look at this under three headings, which I've taken from a book I read, called *The Message of the Resurrection* by Paul Beasley-Murray. The first is:

I. Facing Up To Your Past

Did you notice that Jesus calls Peter "Simon"? That was his name before he met Jesus, before he confessed him as the Messiah at Caesarea. His *old* name points to a time before belief. It points to a time before Jesus had commissioned him to be the leader of the church. Some also think that the fire that Jesus had made reminded Peter of the fire where he denied Jesus those three times. And, of course, the three questions - "Do you love me?" - were a reminder of the three times that he had denied Him. You see, Jesus' point is to bring him back to that point of failure and for him to admit that failure before Him. If you look at the passage, you'll see that the result of what Jesus did was to cause Peter pain. He was hurt, and the word used here is the same, is the pain of childbirth. That in itself is strange, Peter being a man, but it does say that it's a very painful experience. And I think it's pushing us to see that there is something being birthed out of this - a new beginning. So, admission of sin is painful, pure and simple. It exposes us: exposes our pride, maybe causes some sense of a feeling of shame within us, and it certainly humbles us. However, Jesus sees it as extremely necessary, essential, if we are to have forgiveness.

I was struck again by a verse that I know well from I John, the same John who wrote the gospel. He wrote a letter to the church, and in it he said, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness" (verse 9). But that word, "*if* we confess our sins." If there is to be restoring of a relationship, we must face up to our past. We must admit that our relationship with Jesus is not as it should be, that it's been broken. And if there is forgiveness, we need to admit that we are sinners. The second heading is:

II. Falling In Love With Jesus Again

What sustains a relationship? Jesus tells us that it's *love* that sustains it. Interestingly, Jesus did not say to Peter, "Peter, are you sorry?" He didn't say, "Do you understand how terrible a thing you did in denying Me?" And he didn't say, "Do you promise to do better the next time and to be faithful?" No! Jesus wanted to know if Peter loved Him.

"Do you truly love me more than these, Peter?" (v.15) And these, of course, could be the fishing boats and his old life. It could be the other disciples that are not far away. Or, more likely, it's just the boast that he had: "Do you love Me more than these disciples love Me?" You see, love is essential if a relationship is to be sustained. And the source of our love for Jesus is knowing that Jesus has loved us first. John goes on to say, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:10,19).

I wonder, did Jesus take Peter's hands with His scarred hands and say, "Peter, do you truly love Me more than these?" For Peter, it is a very profound moment, aware of his sin, in the presence of his Lord and Saviour, knowing Jesus loves him and forgives him. And his response, I think, is very moving. It's not boastful, but it's confident and sincere: "Lord, You know all things, You know that I love You" (v17). "*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all*" (Isaac Watts). We love because Jesus first loved us. And thirdly:

III. Fulfilling A Task

Just before this moment, we know the disciples were at a loss about what to do next, hence their going back fishing. Jesus now gives Peter fresh responsibility. "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs." Notice that Jesus has changed the metaphor from fish and fisherman to sheep and shepherd. But in both, He is speaking of people. Love for Jesus is to be seen in love for people. What does it mean to feed them? Is it simply hospitality, providing food? Well, it's at least this, but the instruction, "take care of My sheep", makes this a multifaceted job description. Jesus is the ultimately Good Shepherd: He gives His life for the sheep, He leads them to good pasture, He guides them, He protects them. So this role is primarily pastoral.

But, of course, it's also evangelistic, because Jesus said earlier, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice" (John 10:16). So, love cares about people. Love is pastoral in all the forms that the Bible shares with us. And, of course, at the heart of that pastoral care is to encourage a relationship with Jesus Christ, and we do that by sharing Jesus with others - through our lives, through our testimony, and, of course, through the Word of God. Isn't that a glorious task? It's one that the world cannot do as we share Jesus with others.

And also, we're to show that we love Jesus by following Him into whatever sphere of life He leads us. "Follow me. You must follow me," He tells Peter. I was struck that Peter's life is to be different from John's, and John's is to be different from James', for instance. So Peter is led, we're told to a costly death by crucifixion, and the early Church historians, Eusebius among them, confirms that. John was exiled on Patmos, an island prison, but he was freed from there and went to live in Ephesus, and lived a very long life. But both were sustained, in verse 23, by the great hope that Jesus had risen from the dead and that He would return to bring them to Himself.

This is how we prove we love Jesus, by sharing our love of Jesus with others. It's what we were sent to do (John 20 v 21). Sharing Jesus with others brings life in His name (John 20 v 31). And it's about catching fish in evangelism. It's about caring for the flock in pastoral care. It's about following Jesus wherever He leads so that He is glorified as we love Him and follow Him. So, Jesus asks of each of us, "Do you truly love me more than these?" And our response will be to declare that love and show it. Let us respond to the love of Jesus as we sing a song written by Matt Redman. It's called, "I Will Offer Up My Life". Let us make the words a prayer of response: *I will offer up my life.*

Praise: IPH 542 I Will Offer Up My Life

Prayers for Others:

In James 5 v 13, it states, "If any one of you is in trouble, let them pray." So let's pray.

Heavenly Father, in these times when many things we took for granted before the arrival of the coronavirus in Ireland have disappeared. But we can be reassured You are still with us. You have not disappeared. We pray this morning for those that have lost loved ones due to the virus and for all those that are grieving at this time, especially thinking of Edie McCullagh and the McCullagh family on the loss of Edie's brother, Ivan, and for the Kerens family from Rathgar Church who lost their father this week. We remember Sam Mawhinney's cousins on the death of their father, Anthony, and Sam on the death of his uncle. We remember those who are currently suffering from the virus both at home and in hospital and those in hospital for other reasons. Continue to be with William Brereton. Be with those in nursing homes and those sick at home and their carers. Be with our frontline staff in the health care system and those who are working to ensure our food supply and essential services are provided for. We bring our government before You, especially our

Taoiseach and Minister of Health, and all those advising the government. We thank You for their wisdom so far. Continue to give wisdom in this area and we pray that people will obey their instructions for all our safety.

We remember those who have lost their jobs and businesses. We commit those striving to discover a vaccine and give them wisdom. We pray for those cocooning at home especially those in ill health and those on their own. We pray for any who are struggling at the moment, that You will draw close to them and give them receptive hearts to hear Your call. We pray that we will all use this time to draw closer to You and rely on You in all our circumstances, thinking of 2 Corinthians 1 v 4: "God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

As we think of the situation in our own country, we think of the situation in other countries, where the virus is currently spreading to, where food and water are already scarce and health care is very limited. Help other countries and individuals to be generous, both financial and with advice, to these countries. We think of all those away from home and families at the moment and we give thanks for Information Technology so they can keep in touch. We think of all the students known to us in colleges coping with a very different kind of assessment. We pray for the spiritual welfare of all those connected with our church at this time. Help us to use this time as an opportunity to get to know God better. Help each of us to have a greater knowledge of God as we emerge from these times, and as the world emerges from this situation, that we will have a better world where justice and equity reigns. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Ps 46 v 1. Amen.

Closing Praise: Yet Not I But Through Christ In Me

Benediction:

The good words of the benediction are taken from Ephesians 3:20-21. "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."