

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

When Acker Bilk's daughter was born in 1960, he wrote a piece of music which he named after her, 'Jenny'. It was then used as a signature tune for a BBC young people's serial. The producer of the programme asked him if he would change the name of the piece to the title of the drama: 'Stranger on the Shore'.

When Jesus died and came alive again, he appeared to a group of his disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberias. The end of chapter twenty sounds as though it was meant to be the end of John's Gospel: 'but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.' Then as a footnote, John tells us how Jesus later appeared to some of his disciples who had gone on an unsuccessful fishing trip on the Lake; but they didn't recognise him! Jesus truly was, to them, the 'stranger on the shore'.

This last chapter of John's gospel sets the scene for Peter's rehabilitation following his denial of Jesus. It also gives an important understanding about Peter's later ministry and that of John. This is the third time that Jesus has appeared to his disciples following his resurrection. Peter has suggested a night-time fishing trip with some of the other disciples on the Sea of Galilee. They have not been successful in catching any fish; and as they are returning to shore in the dim morning light, a stranger hails them, asking if they have caught any fish. In the dim light the disciples do not recognise who it is calling to them from the shore. The stranger suggests they cast their nets to the right side of the boat and following his advice they catch an astonishing haul of fish. It is only then that John recognises the stranger as the Lord. On the shore, Jesus has a fire already lit, with some fish cooking; he invites the disciples to eat with him. It is after this meal that Jesus addresses his questions to Peter.

The conversation that follows between Peter and Jesus allows for a three-fold affirmation of love to cancel out the three-fold denial that had gone before. The threefold charge to look after the sheep also strengthens the trust in which Peter is placed. Peter is called to follow Jesus in complete obedience wherever that may lead. This morning we are going to explore the two main themes from this passage and how they might apply to contemporary life.

The first theme is love; the one thing that Jesus questioned Peter about prior to commissioning him was love. This is surely the most basic qualification for

Christian service. Other qualities may be desirable but love is completely indispensable. We know that there is unfinished business following Peter's denial of Christ; that he has not yet redeemed himself. His relationship with the Lord needs to be re-established. Jesus asks the first of the three questions, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" Peter humbly responds, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." In effect he is saying, despite my failure, I love you – you know that I love you. Jesus responds by commissioning him: "Feed my lambs". Jesus asks the question a second time and Peter replies using the same words as his first answer. This time Jesus' commission is "Feed my sheep". When Jesus poses the question for a third time, Peter feels hurt and this time he omits the "Yea Lord"; instead appealing to Jesus' intimate knowledge of all things and therefore of what is in Peter's heart "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." Jesus' commission again is "Feed my sheep". By asking Peter no less than three times, Jesus is testing Peter's consistency and honesty under pressure.

So how might we apply this in our own lives? In John 13 verses 34-35, Jesus gave a new commandment, "That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." Like Peter, our first calling as Christians is to love the Lord with our whole being, only when we do this will we enter into a full relationship with Christ. Loving the Lord in this way and receiving his love in return, will enable us to love one another. This love for others is a sacrificial love, where we put their needs before our own. We must mirror the love of Christ in our lives, reaching out to give comfort: being a conduit for God's love and grace in the lives of others.

The second theme is sin and repentance; Peter's sin and repentance had to be dealt with before he could take up his commission and follow Jesus. He needed to be forgiven and restored into a right relationship with the Lord. As Jesus questioned Peter three times about his love for him, this may have also been Jesus' way of wiping the slate clean after Peter had previously denied Jesus three times; by effectively purging each of the three denials. Like a skilful surgeon, Jesus is cutting away sinful infection, to allow the healing of forgiveness to take place. In so doing Jesus restores Peter to his position of leadership and renews his commission to serve him by meeting the pastoral needs of his flock. Jesus also ensures that the other disciples are witness to the fact that Peter is completely forgiven and restored into full fellowship with them again.

As it was with Peter, so it is with us; before Jesus can be followed and served, the sin in our lives has to be addressed. Our relationship with Jesus begins when, like Peter, we humbly face up to all that grieves him in our lives, whatever this may cost us. No matter how great our failure or how deeply ashamed we are, the Lord will forgive us, renew us and use us in his service. All he asks is that we love him before all things and that we are obedient to his will. This commitment to Christ also involves commitment to the church of Christ, we are commissioned just as Peter was; Jesus still speaks his word to us today, if we have ears to hear it: "Feed my lambs, Feed my sheep".

All Christian's are called to serve the Lord, using the gifts which he has given them. Each of us has a responsibility to discern God's call on our lives, for some this will be into ordained ministry, where they will promise to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent. In the liturgy of Ordination in Common Worship, the ordinands are called to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in the wilderness of the world's temptations and to guide them through its confusions..... With all God's people, that means all of you too, they are to tell the story of God's love. Not everyone is called to ordination but we are all called to care for each other as part of God's family.

As we continue in this Easter season are we actively searching for Christ's presence in our lives, or is he the stranger on the shore; do we recognise his call on our lives to 'Feed my lambs', 'Feed my sheep.' As we continue in this Easter season to rejoice in Jesus Resurrection, his defeat of death and the promise of eternal life, we are also called to share this Good News so that all may come to know the risen Christ as their Lord and Saviour. As Christians that is Christ's commission to each of us.

In Jesus name, Amen.