

Return to your First Love

John 21:15-25

Five years into our ministry at Trinity Church Gosforth the Lord stirred us up out of comfortable life in a growing congregation: we were in an enviable position with resources most would dream about, but the Lord had other ideas. Through a unique combination of circumstances our hearts were opened to St Andrews Canterbury. Within a relatively short time, a call was issued and we accepted, not understanding why, but choosing to believe it was Gods will for this next chapter of our lives.

It's at times like this that the other guy is quick to remind you of what you are leaving and giving up. On the first Tuesday in November 2011 amid the turmoil of what decision to make I spent some time in the worship area at Trinity. As I knelt beside the communion table and in front of the cross, with tears running down my cheeks I heard again that what really mattered in my life was knowing Him!

Although I had to lay Trinity down I knew in those moments that I still loved Him and perhaps more importantly He loved me. There in the worship area I laid my ministry, my plans, and my work, before the Lord. I had learned again that the life spring of my ministry had to be my love for Jesus. The love for my calling, my congregation (T) and my ministry was not sufficient. All my hopes and dreams were worthless if they did not flow out of this relationship with Jesus. Kneeling before the Cross I remembered again how He had died for me. It was as though He was saying: David, do you love me.....do you really love me? In that context what did it mean that He was calling me to go? Because at the table, at the cross, all that mattered was His love for me and my love for Him. The bottom line: did I love Jesus more than anyone or anything else? I realised again that without that relationship all I did was in vain and my ministry was a fraud.

My favourite meal is Fish & Chips - mushy peas complete it! A fish supper always tastes good! Fish was in the menu when Peter had to learn the same hard lesson as I did 18 months ago. He and four of the other disciples including the unnamed John had gone fishing: Living in the past is easier than facing the challenge of the future! Fishing: let's return to a comfortable safe and golden age. They choose the right time (night), the right place (Galilee was full of fish) & the right equipment (boats and nets) but they caught nowt! That's the problem of un-ordained work. So Jesus asks the rhetorical question: Any Fish boys? And expects the answer no! Someone once said that the biggest miracle here is that fishermen took direction from a carpenter: how often do we arrogantly think we know better than Jesus!! Throw your nets on the right side of the boat: they did and the catch was amazing (153: interestingly said to equal the number of languages known at that time). John gets it immediately and affirms: It's the Lord. Peter as ever catching on reacts physically: He leaps over the side of the boat, wades through the waves, and across the shingle beach to greet His Risen Saviour, and while fish was on the open fire, Jesus made Peter face up to the bottom line of discipleship: 'Peter, do you love me?'

There were a hundred and one things Jesus could have talked about. There was the evangelisation of the world, the mission of the Church and the future of the Kingdom for starters.....But Jesus knew He only had to get one thing straight. This had to be the starting point. Peter had to get this sorted before the breath taking story of the Acts of the Apostles (Holy Spirit) could unfold.

But what a question! Hadn't Peter given enough, by leaving all behind to follow Jesus? Hadn't he done enough, this 'so called rocky one on which the Church would be built? No. Peter's denial three times before the cock crowed had to be faced up to - his unfaithfulness had to be dealt with before the next chapter could unfold. All the

scriptures and all the good deeds didn't mean anything unless he could look Jesus in the eye and say: I love you!

Peter, do you love me more than these? The boat, the fish, the tackle, the business, the livelihood, the culture of the Galilean fishermen, the camaraderie of the crew, the good times on the lake, the family, the friends..... the safe ordered life passed on down the generation of Galilean fisher folk. Did Peter really love Jesus more than these? Peter's love for Jesus couldn't be a divided love. It had to be a love which outweighed every human consideration, a love which Jesus warned would demand 'his soul, his life, his all', the ultimate sacrifice, a love without compromise. Three times the question came, three times the answer given. Without hesitation, confident, assured. And so, at last, Peter was commissioned. It was time for him to put his boat away and get on with the mission. The story of the early church could begin: Peter, feed my Sheep.

The bottom line for mission is always love: His Love for us, and our love for Him. This and this alone, can be the driving force behind our mission. Our motive for going cannot to be a drive to 'build up the church' or 'to make new members'. Traditional denominational congregations: Anglican, Methodist, URC, Salvation Army are at present in the UK facing rapid of not terminal decline in their membership: only 25% of these congregations have any children or young people, the majority of members are over 65, and most the remainder are over 50. But decline in the church and the feeling that we must do something are not sound biblical reasons for engaging in mission! The church isn't like the golf club, on the look out for new members, and the gospel says nothing about maintaining an institution.

It's pointless to engage in mission because the Pastor or Elders say so. Evangelism can't be obligatory. And if people are pushed into mission they will find it a fruitless and joyless task. Mission can only

even be a labour of love. And it is this love which is the bottom line for our missionary calling: without it there can be no valid Christian Mission.

I remember once being present when 30 young Christians were commissioned to begin a year of front-line pioneer mission - I became aware of the kind of real cost of discipleship which many of them were paying. Some of them were leaving families, special friends, well-paid jobs, and neatly ordered career plans to live by faith and serve the Lord. Yet there was such joy in their willingness to go, and such generosity in their sacrifice. Only love for Jesus could have triggered it.

This is the love that lies at the heart of all we proclaim, and if we don't really love Him there is no point in going. There is no gospel to tell outside a self-denying relationship which says: Jesus I love you. Without this love we will not be prepared to pay the price that mission demands.

Are you the kind of person that's always loosing things? Car Keys, diary, phone - has anyone seen my? Perhaps the rest of the household reply: when did you see it last? You must retrace your steps to see whether and where you left you treasured possession. Perhaps you like me experience times when you have lost the point of your mission, the purpose has been blunted, and the way ahead fogged? There have been times I have honestly wondered whether the missionary task the Lord has assigned me is really worth the cost. In moments when my mission has been going wrong, when others didn't seem willing to stand beside me, when the work seemed impossible I know there is only one way ahead!

I must retrace my steps to the one who sent me. I must go back to the vision of Jesus, the table filled with bread and wine, and the haunting question: Do you really love me?

Throughout John's gospel we have seen that he refers to himself as the other disciple or another disciple. However insight into how he felt about his relationship with Jesus is found in 13:23 'one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved': John was that disciple. Did Jesus love John more than the others? No. The fact, however, that John could sense the Saviour's love for him must have been reassuring. As a consequence, God's love became to principal subject for him and it permeates all that he writes in his gospel, letters and the 'Revelation' received on Patmos toward s the end of his life..

It seems clear that everyone is loved by God, and that He proclaimed that blessed reality by sending Our Lord to Planet Earth. Jesus manifested God's love by reaching out to people and going to the cross in their place. He also encouraged those who believed in Him to love others as He loved them. Too difficult? Well, it will demand relinquishing some prejudices and biases. It may mean setting aside personal agenda items. It will require the death of selfishness in order for love to rise in prominence. How is love known? By giving oneself to Jesus. How is love developed? By following the example of Jesus.

A contemporary proverb is based on the story in John 6 about the feeding of the 5000: 'Love is like the five loaves and two fishes. It is never enough until it is given away.' Jesus loves and He makes all who will receive Him a lover of God....and of people too.

Pastor David

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