

## **John 21:4-19 – Do you love me more than all this?**

Post Easter encounters - a couple of weeks after the resurrection...

John 21 and the restoration of Peter by Jesus is one of my favourite passages in the Bible. It shows us a God of the second chance. It shows us that your past failures do not have to disqualify you from future fruitfulness. It shows us the amazing grace of God in and through Jesus Christ. It gives hope to every stumbling and faltering follower of Jesus who has messed up and melted down. It shows us the answer to Jesus' earlier prayer for Peter – "Simon Peter, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail. And after you have turned back strengthen your brothers."

It is a rallying cry for all of us to love and to follow Jesus with fresh vigour and hope.

### **2 questions:**

- 1) Do you love Jesus?
- 2) Will you follow him?

The law of love and the lure of grace and the gospel...

### **1) Do you love Jesus (more than all this?)**

Three years earlier, these very men had been fishing on this very sea. On that occasion, as we read in Luke 5, they had also worked through the night and caught nothing, and then, as now, Jesus had told them to put out their nets again on the other side.

It's like a slow-motion replay. They have gone full circle.

Do you ever feel like you are going round in circles with your life and walk with God?

The same sea, the same boats, the same futile night of fishing, and Jesus standing on the shore. And it is at this moment that John sees and recognises and exclaims: "It is the Lord!"

The risen Lord.

It has been an amazing three years since they first encountered Jesus on this same seashore, by these waters, and he called them to follow him. A roller coaster ride of emotions and experience. Some astounding miracles and healings.

There have been confrontations with religious leaders, with the demonic, with disease and with death itself. There have been huge crowds, throngs of people wanting a piece of Jesus, craning to hear his teaching, travelling across the region to receive his power.

And there have been quiet moments of solitude and intimacy, where it has just been Jesus and them. On the water. On the mountain. Away from the madding crowds. He has eaten with them, taught them, rebuked them and prayed for them....

But the last days have been tumultuous and challenging. Jesus has been arrested and tied up and beaten and crucified.

And now I guess they are thinking and wondering if it was all an illusion – a cul-de-sac – a dead end of disappointment of disillusionment.

Sometimes things – life – do not turn out the way that we thought they would.

And they are back fishing.

Back at the Sea of Galilee where it all started.

And now Peter has an exchange with the Saviour which is a crucial turning point for him individually and for the apostles and the wider church generally.

Jesus asks Peter:

15: "Do you love me more than all of this?"

This is a question that gets to the very crux of following Jesus.

Do you love me more than these?

More than the fishing. More than this way of life. More than these nets. More than this familiar territory.

Peter responds to the question:

“Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus repeats the question and asks a second time: “Do you love me?”

“Yes Lord, you know that I love you” Peter replies.

And with relentless scrutiny, as he looks into Peter’s eyes, Jesus asks a third time – “Peter do you love me?”

“Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.”

The memory is very fresh in Peter’s mind – seared on his conscience - of the last time he was asked a question three times by a charcoal fire, and how on that occasion he had answered three times in the negative.

Peter had denied Jesus three times, so Jesus requires this elementary and yet profound confession as he gently and purposefully restores Peter and reminds him of his calling.

And I guess the question to Peter is: “Peter, why are we back here? Back at the same nets, back on this shore, back by these waters, back having the same conversation?”

If I want fish, Peter, I can get fish.

What I need is someone who will feed my lambs, what I need, Peter, is someone who will take care of my sheep, who will pastor and lead my followers, what I need is someone who will preach the gospel, and defend the faith. I need someone who loves me – who truly loves me - and will follow me and make disciples.

So, Peter, I am asking you for the second time, as I asked you three years ago – to leave all this behind and, instead of catching

fish, I want you to catch men and women – to teach and to testify. I am asking you to labour and to serve loyally until the day comes when they will do to you what they did to me...

And the basis for all of this – the motivation - is the first and greatest commandment – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength...”

Do you love me - more than all this?

The same question comes to us all.

The same fundamental basis applies to us all.

Do ... you .... love Jesus more than anything else?

Your failures and your past are what they are. You cannot undo them or rewrite them.

In some ways – you may feel like you have gone backwards in your faith. Like some game of spiritual snakes and ladders. And you find yourself back where you started.

But God in his love and mercy and grace still comes to you and still calls you and still challenges you – in love to follow him.

And like Peter, he commissions us – having put our hand to the plough – not to look back but to love him wholeheartedly and follow him completely...

Love for Jesus is the **central mandate** and the **compelling motivation** for following Jesus for the long haul...

Everything comes from that.

The Apostle Paul recognises this. He sees through the fatuousness, the emptiness, the hollowness of life and even apparently successful and impressive ministry that does not have **love** at its very core ....

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, **but do not have love**, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all

knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.....

these three remain: faith, hope and love. But **the greatest of these is love.**" (1 Corinthians 13)

The same principle applies in John's revelation, as Jesus challenges the church in Ephesus:

"I know your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have laboured for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that **you have left your first love**. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works" (Revelation 2:1-7)

Whatever stage of life and ministry you are in, whatever you are busy with or occupied by – what really counts more than anything else – is your loving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Do you truly love me** more than all this other stuff?

If you love me, you will obey my commandments....

The law of love....

For us, it may not be fishing – but there are many things that compete with God for the love and affection of our hearts, the focus of our minds and the exercise of our energy and strength. These can include worthwhile pursuits, Christian ministry, relationships or possessions .....

The call of Jesus to every one of his disciples is to love him. First and foremost, before anything else, to love him more than all of this...

And love covers over a multitude of sins...

Augustine: "Love God and do what you want"

The law of love..... and the lure of grace

## 2) Will you follow him?

As he restores Peter with this threefold confession of love, Jesus commissions Peter to feed and care for the lambs and sheep, repeating the call of three years earlier:

“Follow me”

That initial encounter – recorded in Luke 5 - mirrors in many ways this account in John 21 – but it differs in one major way.

In the Luke 5 account, when Peter encounters Jesus his response is to run away from him.

“Go away from me, Lord, I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8)

For a long time, Peter thought the call to follow Jesus depended on him and his righteousness – his good-enough-ness.

A lot of people think and feel that way about Jesus and the call to follow him.

The first time – counting on his own abilities – Peter runs away from Jesus. Get away from me Jesus – I am too sinful.

This time – in John 21 (verse 7) – Peter runs towards Jesus. He runs and swims and wades towards Jesus.

Because now he understands the lure of grace and the gospel.

You call me to Your purpose

As angels understand

For Your glory, may You draw all men

As Your love and grace demands

... And I will run to You

To Your words of truth

Not by might, not by power

But by the Spirit of God

... Yes, I will run the race

'Til I see Your face

Oh, let me live in the glory of Your grace

We get distracted and diverted on this pathway as we seek to follow Jesus – just like John Bunyan's pilgrim. Some of us end up in the slough of despond, or on the hill of difficulty, or the plain called ease. Some of us enter the valley of the shadow of death.

Peter went back to the water.

Back to what was familiar.

For a while he thought the game was over. He thought he had disqualified himself by denying Jesus, maybe he couldn't get past his past.

But the same calling comes to him from the lips of Jesus.

“Follow me.”

This time the great motivation is love and the underlying force is grace and the gospel.

This time it won't be in Peter's strength or on his terms, it will be in the strength and mercy and grace of Jesus.

It will be in answer to Jesus' prayer for him:

“Peter, Satan as asked to sift you as wheat – but I have prayed for you. And after you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

We all face times of discouragement and disorientation.

Ainsworth and snow-covered fields.

A field full of sheep.

The calling of God.

Different junctures of life – baptism (follow, follow, I will follow Jesus), leaving home, coming to Plymouth, having kids, recent years.....

The calling remains....

Words that people are longing to hear:

From Philip Yancey's "Vanishing Grace" quoting

Mark Rutland - The healing and redemptive grace of God

- 1) I love you
- 2) I forgive you
- 3) Supper (or food) is ready

We have such a moment here.

The healing of a memory and the restoration of Peter...

Sights and sounds and smells that remind us of certain times and places and events....

The charcoal fire – the betrayal....

And now.....

I love you

I forgive you

Come and eat....

Jesus does this with each one of us....

He restores us

He forgives us

He loves us

He replenishes and feeds us

He lays a table for us in the presence of our enemies....

There is something wonderful about a God who sends angels to make a meal for a tired and depressed prophet, or one who rains down food on a fleeing people in the desert, or a saviour who cooks bread and fish for some tired and weary followers....

He will do the same for us – he loves you and he knows what you need – and he is gracious and compassionate – his mercies and his compassion are new every day...

Will you follow Jesus? Wherever he leads you?

Whatever stage of life you are in?

What is the tenure for following Jesus?

When does following Jesus expire?

David served the purpose of God in his generation – and then he died.

You can stop following Jesus when you die – until then you are to serve the purposes of God in this generation – while you still have breath.

The calling still stands. The outworking will change for sure. You may not minister in the same way. You may be in a different place, a different season, faced with different openings and opportunities....

But Jesus is still asking you the same question.

Do you love me more than all this? The law of love.

Will you follow me? The lure of grace.

Follow, follow I will follow Jesus.....

**Community group questions and discussion points:**

1. What do you notice about the setting and repeated details (the sea, the fishing, the charcoal fire), and why do you think John includes them?
2. Why do you think Jesus asks Peter the same question three times, and how would that have connected to Peter's earlier denial?
3. What does Jesus mean by "Do you love me more than these?"—and what might "these" represent in our own lives today?
4. How does Peter's response ("Lord, you know that I love you") reflect both confidence and humility after his failure?
5. What does Jesus' command to "feed my lambs / take care of my sheep" teach us about how love for Jesus is expressed in action?
6. In what ways can past failure distort a person's sense of calling, and how does this passage challenge that mindset?
7. What is the difference between Peter running away from Jesus in Luke 5 and running toward Jesus in John 21, and what does that reveal about spiritual growth?
8. Where are the "back to fishing" moments in your own life—times you are tempted to return to what is familiar instead of following Jesus forward?
9. How do "law of love" (loving Jesus supremely) and "lure of grace" (Jesus restoring and calling us again) work together in this passage?
10. Jesus ends with a simple command: "Follow me." What would faithful "following" look like for you in your current season of life right now?