

JOHN 21.15-17: BEGINNING AGAIN WITH JESUS

[Chelmsford 24 May 2009]

Martin Luther once had a dream in which there was a book where all his sins were written down. In the dream, the devil spoke to Luther: "*Martin, here is one of your sins, here is another*", as he pointed to the writing in the book. But Luther said to the devil: "*Take a pen and write, 'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin'*"

I.e. in Jesus we can always begin with a fresh slate.

- In Jesus there is always a new beginning
- In Jesus there is always forgiveness

It doesn't matter who we are/what we have done - in Jesus we can always begin again.

Take the Apostle **Peter**, for instance. If ever a man let Jesus down, it was Peter.

For Peter when push came to shove, **Peter failed** to stand by his Lord.

Three times he denied that he had anything to do with Jesus.

Yet Jesus forgave him - & went on to give him a position of trust in his church.

I find **Jesus' behaviour utterly mind-blowing**.

Let's face it: there is nothing worse than being let down by a close friend - and in particular being let down by a friend in front of others.

- If we had been Jesus, we would have had nothing more to do with Peter after those denials in the courtyard of the high priest - the friendship would have been well and truly over
- If we had been Jesus and seen Peter walking along the street, we would have crossed over the other side and done our best to have given him the cold shoulder.
- If we had been Jesus, the last thing we would have done would have been to have invited him to come and have breakfast with us.

But then this just illustrates the massive gulf between us and Jesus.

For Jesus never gives up on anybody.

Indeed, in spite of your failure and mine, **Jesus never turns his back on us**.

We may give up on him, but he never gives up on us.

But what exactly is involved in beginning again with Jesus?

This morning I want us to look at Peter's breakfast meeting with Jesus, and as we do so we shall find that **beginning again with Jesus involves action on our part too**.

1. BEGINNING AGAIN INVOLVES FACING UP TO OUR PAST

Yes, **Peter that morning was made to face up to his past** – in three different ways:

1. The charcoal fire

John tells us that when Peter & his friends "**stepped ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there with fish on it and some bread**" (21.9).

I wonder whether the very sight of that **charcoal fire** made Peter wince?

Are we reading too much into the story to see here a reminder of that occasion a week or so earlier when Peter had been warming himself by a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest? (18.18)

It may well be that Jesus by building that charcoal fire was deliberately seeking to recreate the setting in which Peter denied him. According to one commentator, the fire can be likened to "*a trigger mechanism, stimulating Peter into remembering his denials as opposed to denying them... Jesus triggers his 'shame circuits' in order to help him towards the wholeness he will need in order to be a true shepherd of the sheep*" (Stibbe).

2. *The 3-fold question*

Certainly, the 3-fold questioning of Peter was designed to recall his 3-fold denial of Jesus. Three times Jesus asked: "**Simon, son of John, do you love me?**"

In particular, Jesus asked: "**Do you love me more than these others?**" (21.15) - i.e. more than these other disciples.

Almost certainly Jesus was referring to the occasion when Peter had brashly asserted his loyalty to him. For when in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus told the disciples that they would all desert him that night, Peter said: "**I will never leave you, even though all the rest do**" (Matt 26.33). '*You can count on me Lord, whatever the others do*'. Ironically, it was Peter who more than the others let Jesus down.

3. *The formal use of the old name*

"**Simon, son of John, do you love me?**" (21.15, 16, 17)

Notice the way in which Jesus keeps on addressing Peter.

Jesus does not address him as **Peter**, but as '**Simon, son of John**'

Jesus gave Simon the name Peter at Caesarea Philippi, when Peter had confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. "**Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church**" (Matt 16.16). But the Lord can only build his church on those who confess his name, not on those who deny him.

Now, deliberately it seems to me, Jesus used his old name, the name he used when they first met. *Jesus was challenging his very friendship.*

The charcoal fire, the three fold questioning, the formal use of the old name, must have been *painful beyond for Peter*.

In the words of John: "**Peter was sad because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?'**" (21.17). Peter was '**hurt**' (NRSV)

I can imagine the sweat pouring down Peter's face.

Jesus by reminding him of his past failure, was well and truly twisting in the knife.

But as they say, "*no pain, no gain*". The painful business of facing up to his past failure was essential if Peter were to make a new beginning.

Forgiveness only becomes complete as we face up to our past failures. As John wrote in his First Letter: "**If we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise..; he will forgive us our sins & purify us from all our wrongdoing**" (1 Jn 1.9)

One pastor (David Runcorn) put it this way: "*Until there is a remembering there can be no forgiveness. To re-member means to put back together something that has been broken & disconnected... To truly remember requires that we turn back to past actions & relationships and recognise our own place within what happened - only there can reconciliation be offered and received*".

2. BEGINNING AGAIN INVOLVES FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN WITH JESUS

Peter was not simply reminded of his past failure.

Peter was also given an opportunity to obliterate this three-fold failure, by re-affirming his love for Jesus again and again and again.

Three times Jesus asked: "**Simon, son of John, do you love me?**"

Twice Peter replied: "**Yes Lord; you know that I love you**"

On the third occasion Peter declared: "**Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you**" (21.17).

Do notice: Jesus didn't ask:

- "*Simon, son of John, are you sorry for what you did?*"
- "*Simon, son of John, from now on will you be more faithful?*"

No, Jesus asked if he loved him.

This is the essential religious question. *A Christian is somebody who loves Jesus.*

Of course, there is more to faith than loving. Faith has an intellectual side, as well as an emotional side. But nonetheless we are called to "**love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength**".

The determinative point in our religious pilgrimage is not when we can say "*Yes, I understand*", but rather "*Yes Lord, I do love you*".

Christian faith begins when we respond to the love of God in Christ.

Christian faith begins when we give our "heart" to the Lord Jesus.

It is not enough to believe. As James reminds us "**The demons also believe - and tremble with fear**" (Jas 2.19).

To be a true follower of the Lord Jesus, we need to love with all our heart.

As the Risen Christ told the church at Laodicea, he can't stand "luke-warm" Christians - he wants passionate Christians - Christians passionately in love with him.

GK Chesterton: "*Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair*".

Whoever heard of a cold-blooded love affair? True love, involves passion.

The question is:

- How passionate are we?
- How much do we love Jesus?

The story is told of a minister who got up in his pulpit one Sunday and suddenly cried out "*Fire, fire*". When the congregation began to panic, he went on "*Fire everywhere, everywhere - except in the church*".

Jesus wants us to be passionately in love with him.

If we are to begin again with Jesus, we must fall in love with him again.

3. BEGINNING AGAIN INVOLVES LOVING OTHERS

Love for Jesus involves loving others.

Self-centered worship of Jesus is a contradiction in terms: if we truly love Jesus then we will love others.

In the case of Peter he was called to prove his love for Jesus by caring for the sheep.

For Jesus said: "**Take care of my lambs... Take care of my sheep**" (15,16,17)

The fisherman now becomes a shepherd. The imagery changes, for fish die when they are caught, but sheep must be fed & cared for.

Although this was a particular command given to Peter, I believe that Jesus' words to Peter can also be applied to us.

We are called to love and care for our fellow Christians.

As Paul puts it in 1 Cor 12.25, we are the body of Christ and as such members of one another, members who are responsible for the **care** of one another.

Jesus calls us to care for one another – to love one another

Some years ago I preached a sermon on this passage and spelt out ***the implications of caring for one another*** in five different ways. To care for one another is

- to ***know the names of everybody*** in the church - we cannot care for one another unless we know one another
- to ***invite those who live on their own*** into our homes - hospitality is a Christian duty incumbent on us all
- to ***visit older members*** - the older people become, the lonelier they often get
- to ***take an interest in the young people*** of the church - particularly those who come from non-Christian homes.
- to begin ***prayer partnerships with younger Christians*** - encouraging them along in the Christian life

St John of the Cross said: "*When the evening of this life comes, we shall be judged on love*". Love is what counts - love expressed in love for others.

If we would begin again with Jesus, we must face up to our past, fall in love again with Jesus, and love those whom he has given to us to love.

4. BEGINNING AGAIN INVOLVES FOLLOWING JESUS ALONE

Peter didn't just call Peter to care for his sheep.

He also invited Peter to become his disciple again: "**Follow me**" (21.19) said Jesus.

And what did Peter do? John tells us that immediately "**Peter turned round and saw behind him that other disciple whom Jesus loved** [i.e. John]... **and asked 'Lord, what about his man?'**". *'Lord, what about the other chap?'* (21.20,21)

But Jesus replied, as it were *'That is none of your business – follow me'* (21.22)

Time and again we Christians compare ourselves with others

But Jesus calls us to follow him – and that means that we focus on him, and not others.

The fact is that God is not in the business of creating clones. God has a distinctive plan for each of our lives.

Certainly, this was true for Peter and John..

- To **Peter** Jesus said: "**When you were young, you used to get ready and go anywhere you wanted to; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will bind you and take you where you don't want to go**" (21.18). As the Gospel writer adds: "**In saying this, Jesus was indicating the way in which Peter would die & bring glory to God**" (21.19). According to the church historian Eusebius in AD 61 Peter died a martyr's death in Rome for his Lord. He too was crucified, save that when he was being nailed to the cross, he asked to be nailed to it head downwards, for he said he was not worthy to die as his Lord had died.
- On the other hand **John** lived to a great old age & eventually died in his sleep. We know that at one stage he was exiled to the island of Patmos. Tradition says he was eventually released and went to Ephesus, where he became a leading figure in the church. According to 4th century Biblical scholar, Jerome: "*John lived on in Ephesus to extreme old age. Toward the end he could only with difficulty be carried to church in the arms of his disciples, and became unable to say many words, apart from to keep on repeating: 'Little children, love one another'. At length the disciples and fathers who were there, tired of always hearing him say the same words, and so they said: 'Master, why do you always say this?' 'It is the Lord's command, John replies, ' and if this alone is done, it is enough!'"*

The point I am trying to make is that although both men followed Jesus, both ended up living very different lives. They found that God's pattern for their lives was not the same, but different.

The same is true for you and for me. There is no one pattern for our lives.

God deals with us on an individual basis and calls each of us to live out our particular calling.

There is no point in comparing ourselves with one another.

Certainly there is no point in trying to emulate one another.

For the moment we begin to emulate one another than moment we may move away from God's pattern for our living.

The important thing is that we seek to follow Jesus and fulfil his purpose for our lives.

So to recap: The good news is that, however much we may have failed Jesus, we can always begin again. But if we to begin again, then, we need to

- Face up to our past
- Fall in love with Jesus again
- Love others
- Follow Jesus alone