

April 29th 2012:Resurrection Appearances #4: John 21:15-19
The Question That Challenged Peter's Heart

The Question That Challenged Peter's Heart: Over the last few weeks we have been considering some of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, and this morning we focus in on that time when He sat with Peter on the beach and asked him three questions. Three questions that were in fact one:- Peter do you love me enough to be all that I want you to be?

The enormous catch of fish has been safely gathered in. The breakfast He made has been eaten. And now Jesus confronts Peter with a challenge aimed right at Peter's heart.

In doing so He deliberately makes Peter feel uncomfortable, because the love He has for Peter as a person is equaled only by the love He has for His church as a body, and for the mission he has given her. He directly challenges Peter here because of the immense importance of the work that He has for Peter to do from that moment on.

Several days before Peter had shown Himself to be quite weak in His stand for Jesus in a time of crisis. He had let His Lord down. He had denied Him three times. A denial made so much worse because of the promises Peter had made, about his readiness to die before he would ever forsake his leader. Promises made loudly, before the other disciples, and very much in his own strength.

Those promises are recorded in each of the four Gospels, and the actual occasion on which they were made was a very emotionally charged one, for it was directly after the last supper. Judas had just left on his mission of betrayal and Jesus had taken the rest of them out to the Mount of Olives. It was just before Gethsemane and Matthew 26:31-35 records it like this:

³¹ Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

***"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."***

³² But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

³³ Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."³⁴ "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

³⁵ But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

It is noticeable that all the other disciples followed his lead but it was Peter who was by far the most vocal, and it was Peter who made it most certain that even if all others left Jesus, he never would. For He was Simon Peter. Self appointed leader. Confident in His own strength and power.

Yet Peter did deny Jesus. When he no longer had his sword in his hand and the others around him. When he came face to face with those he viewed as the enemy. It just took questions from two servant girls for him to declare that he never even knew Jesus, and to do so with an oath. And when the pressure really built up—for John tells us that the group that then challenged him included a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off—Peter began to curse and carry on and to swear that Jesus was nothing to him.

It was at that moment, Luke tells us in 22:61

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times."

Peter then broke down and wept bitterly.

And now, here on the beach, Jesus once more looks directly at Peter and once again Peter was reminded of his recent threefold denial by the threefold repetition of the same question. And the importance of these questions is emphasized by the fact that Jesus uses Peter's full name each time. "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

And with the first question Jesus adds the additional phrase:—"more than these?" Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?

And straight away Peter is reminded of the arrogance and self trust he displayed when he had declared that his support for Jesus was so much greater than these other disciples, and therefore He would never deny Him even if they did. Yet now he realizes that like them he too had been found wanting. His will and his strength had let him down when the pressure was on, but his emotional love for Jesus had never failed. He had denied Jesus but never stopped loving Him.

So his response to Jesus is, "Yes Lord, You know that I love you". And it is here that the Greek words used for love come into play. For whereas Jesus used the word agape, which talks of God's love, which is a powerful sacrificial love that wills itself never to stop giving, even if it means giving up one's life. Peter uses a word that speaks of love from the heart. Love that sometimes stops short of the courageous acts that agape love does so well.

I am sure that we can all sympathize with Peter at this point. It is as if he was saying to Jesus, I know now that in myself I can't promise the type of love that will face death rather than let you down, but I will always love you from my heart.

And I too have felt that at times, and I'm sure you have. Where I know I love Jesus and always will, but have not felt confident in my reaction if I were asked to sacrifice my life for Him. To take my love for Him to the next level. But the wonderful thing is that Jesus still responds with a commission for Peter to serve Him. For Peter to be part of the global mission that Christ has by feeding His lambs, and caring for and feeding His sheep.

Indeed, when Jesus asks the question a third time, He uses Peter's word for love, and I think that He may well have been saying, "Look Peter do you then love me with that heart type of love?" And Peter, who is feeling the pressure so much by this time, blurts out the words, "Lord you know all things—you know that I have always loved you. Even though I wasn't able to take my love to the next level on that fateful night. Even though I let you down. Lord, you know that despite my fears and limitations, I love you.

And if you go back sometime soon and look at this passage from John 21 you will discover that Jesus not only confirmed that He would use Peter mightily for His kingdom, but that the time would come when Peter's love would reach that next level where He would lay down his life for Jesus. That he too would die on a cross for the sake of His master, because God the Holy Spirit would transform him and enable him to do, in God's strength, that which He could never do in his own.

So this meeting of the resurrected Jesus with Peter is an extremely important one and it teaches us a lot about Jesus and about Peter. But it also has some important things to say to us.

It first lets us know that Jesus does hold us accountable. When we let Him down and His work on earth suffers He desires that we take our failings

seriously. He won't just pretend it never happened and neither should we. The Holy Spirit is present in our hearts to convict us and to lead us to repentance and renewal. And this is particularly the case when we fail to make the stand for Jesus that He wants us to make.

But He never holds our failings against us. He simply calls us to re-affirm our love for Him and then gives us more opportunities to serve Him.

Second it assures us that God knows our hearts. He knows the limitations of our human love for Him and His people. He knew it in Peter and He knows it in us too. But what He gave to Peter that enabled Peter to be absolutely transformed in his love He has also given to every believer. The gift of the Holy Spirit. For this means, as Romans 5:1-5 in the CEV says, and with this I close:

By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live at peace with God. ² Christ has also introduced us to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. ³ But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. ⁴ And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope ⁵ that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.