3rd Sunday of Easter 2025

Some of the television shots of that enormous crowd which attended the funeral of Pope Francis, gave the appearance that it was embraced by the arms of Bernini’s great colonnade. Although most of us were viewing from our living rooms, were we not, in a sense, there too sharing in it all? On Wednesday of this week the “conclave” begins, and we pray, that, within a short time, we will see “the white smoke”, and there will be a new successor to the Apostle Peter. Our new Pope, like Peter, will be commissioned by our Lord, *“feed my lambs, feed my sheep”*, and will be constantly challenged by the question, *“Do you love me more than these others do?”*

In today’s Gospel passage, we encounter the “first” Peter. There was something about Peter that made him stand out, and this “something” Jesus recognised. Of course, the Gospels make it clear that he was far from perfect - Peter himself declared, *“Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man” (Lk.5:8*). Nevertheless, he had something that the others didn’t have – he had leadership quality, and the other apostles quite naturally followed him – *“Peter said, ‘I’m going fishing’. They replied, ‘We’ll come with you’”.*

Three years had passed since Jesus said to Peter and the others, *“Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mk.1:17)..* We can only speculate as to why Peter decided to return to the life of a fisherman – perhaps he thought that the great adventure with Jesus of Nazareth was now just memories and shared stories, and that the time had come to settle down again – but events soon frustrated that notion. Peter’s decision, and that of his companions, to return to fishing, in actual fact, provided the perfect setting for what Jesus would do next.

Their return to fishing was initially frustrating, *“they caught nothing that night”.* As the new day was breaking, and they were returning to the shore, probably somewhat downcast, a stranger on the shore called out, *“Have you caught anything, friends?”*  And when they answered, *“No”*, he told them, *“Throw the net out to starboard and you will find something”,* and the haul was huge! It was only then that they recognised the stranger on the shore, *“It is the Lord.”* Peter, obviously overwhelmed, spontaneously jumped out of the boat and waded ashore towards Jesus. In the light of that new day, it had at last dawned on Peter, that it was only with Jesus, that he could achieve anything, and that there was no going back to former ways.

But first, between Jesus and Peter there was unfinished business. On shore, the apostles, with Jesus, gathered around a charcoal fire – which surely evoked painful memories for Peter, as it was at such a fire, in the High Priest's Courtyard, that he denied knowing Jesus. However, painful memories cannot be buried – it is only when they are gently brought to the light of day that they can be healed, and that is exactly what Jesus desired to do for Peter. That indeed is, for us, the blessing of the Sacrament of Confession – there, deep wounds, old hurts, abysmal failures, and betrayals are healed with love and prayer.

Jesus brought to the light of day Peter’s threefold denial not by asking, “why did you betray me?” He knew Peter's frailty, just as he knows yours and mine. What Jesus did was to go to where the real pain was; he went to the very heart of the problem, and asked Peter, *“do you love me?”*. Confronted by such a direct question, Peter spoke the truth, *“Yes, Lord, I love you”*, and Jesus responded with the equivalent of “I trust you!”. Peter is given a command, a fresh challenge, and a renewed commission, *“feed my lambs, feed my sheep”*. Jesus sought, and found, the love that was deep in Peter's heart, and by enabling Peter to express it, healed the wound of betrayal.

Just as with Peter, deep down within each of us, there is a real love for Jesus, even though we let him down time-and-time again. Jesus yearns to find that love and to set it free. In every Mass, he asks again, *“Do you love me?”* And every “Amen” we utter in the Mass, is our “Yes”. It is this love that impels us to care for our family, our friends and neighbours, our fellow parishioners, those with whom we work, and indeed for anyone who has a claim on our time and our generosity. Service to others is the proof of true love.

Jesus, once said to Peter, *“I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen the others’ (Lk.22:32).* May we pray this week for the one who will be chosen to be Peter in today’s Church, and that in spite of his human frailty, he will be empowered to strengthen us in our faith*.*

This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.**Amen.**