

‘Do you love me?’ John 21. 15-17. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 17 June 2009.

As you know, in recent weeks we have been working our way through some of the important questions to be found in the Gospel of John. This morning we have reached a question posed to the apostle Peter by our Lord Jesus some time after His resurrection, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?’

And the setting for this particular question is all-important.

‘After these things’, John says in the last chapter of his gospel, ‘Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (known to us better as the Lake of Galilee). ... Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore ... They (that is, seven of our Lord’s disciples) saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you". He said to him, "Feed my lambs" (speaking, of course, of His people).

He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you". He said to him, "Tend my sheep".

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you". Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep".

It would be hard to miss that the Lord Jesus asked His question ‘do you love me?’ three times. And I note that on each occasion He addressed the apostle in the same – and unusual – way, ‘Simon, son of Jonah’. As far as the gospel records go, the Lord had spoken to him in this way only twice before ... once, over three years before, when they had met for the very first time,¹ and once following Peter’s great confession that He, Jesus, was the Christ, the Son of the living God.² And I suspect that, from the very way the Lord addressed him, Peter now realised that the Lord was about to say something really important.

And the risen Lord had chosen the location most carefully at which to ask His pointed question.

Not only was this on the shore of the Sea of Galilee – the place where He had first called Peter to follow Him as His disciple³ – but it was, as you may have noticed, near what the gospel calls ‘a fire of coals’. And this place held special significance for the apostle, because it was at another fire of coals, not that long before, that he had publicly disowned the Lord Jesus – denying, reinforced by oaths and curses,⁴ that he had ever known Jesus – still less ever been one of His disciples.

Back in chapter 18, John tells how, on the evening immediately before our Lord’s crucifixion ...

‘The detachment of troops and ... officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him. They led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year ... Simon Peter followed ... The servant girl who kept the door said to Peter, "Are you not also one of this man’s disciples?" He said, "I am not". Now the servants and officers had made a *fire of coals* and stood there warming themselves, for it was cold. Peter also stood with them warming himself ... They said to him ... "Are you not also one of His disciples?" He denied it and said, "I am not!" One of the servants of the high priest ... said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" Peter then denied again; and immediately the cock crowed’.

That is the only other place in the entire New Testament where we read of a ‘fire of coals’. At that time Peter stood alongside the fire to warm himself with our Lord’s enemies, and it was there that he denied the Saviour. How forcibly then must this ‘fire of coals’ by the Lake of Galilee have reminded him of that dreadful occasion.

Indeed, the fact that Jesus chose to pose His question *three times* by the fire was itself charged with meaning. For had not Peter denied Jesus *three times* when he had stood alongside that other fire? As I read, Peter – not then grasping the significance of the thrice-repeated question – ‘was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love me?"’

But, for Peter’s own sake, our Lord ensured that, just as once Peter had denied Him three times in the presence of witnesses near a charcoal fire, so he would now, correspondingly, affirm his love for Him three times in the presence of witnesses near another charcoal fire.

You may have noticed that the first time Jesus asked His question ‘Do you love me’ He added the phrase ‘more than these?’ – ‘Do you love me more than these other disciples’, I take Him to mean.

And this addition was loaded with significance for Peter because, prior to his disowning the Lord during our Lord’s so-called trial before the High Priest and Jewish Council, not only had Peter protested that he would remain loyal to

Jesus come what may ... 'Lord, I am ready to go with you, both into prison, and to death ... I will lay down my life for your sake',⁵ were his words ... not only had Peter protested that he would remain loyal to Jesus, but he had specifically asserted, in his own words, that 'Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble'.⁶ Note that 'even if all ... I will never'. What arrogant self-confidence!

And now, by this second fire, the Lord, so to speak, leads Peter back to the spot which held the key to his tragic fall – to his trust in his own strength – to his claim of a love and devotion for the Saviour which surpassed that of the other disciples.

It is as if the Lord now said, 'Simon, after all that has happened, do you still maintain that you love me more than these other disciples?'

But Peter is now a changed man. His earlier fall had broken the neck of his pride, his presumption and his self-confidence. Humbled by his sad failure, he carefully avoids comparison with any others – appealing only to the Saviour's own knowledge.⁷ 'Yes, Lord', he says in effect, 'you know that – in spite of my great failure and sin (which I neither deny nor excuse) – I love you'.

Alongside the first fire the apostle had protested three times that *he* didn't know *Jesus*. Now alongside the second fire he gladly affirms three times that *Jesus* knows *him* – and therefore knows that he truly loves Him.

And why, do you think, did Peter love Him? It was Peter's close friend and companion, John, who later explained, 'We love Him because He first loved us'.⁸ That it is our awareness and enjoyment of *Christ's* love for *us* that awakens and stimulates *our* love for *Him*.

And, standing now the other side of the cross, Peter could appreciate as never before just how much Jesus loved him. That Jesus loved Him, not only enough to pray for him before his denials (as He had said He would)⁹ ... not only enough, following those denials, to convey to him by means of a look His (Jesus') compassion and forgiveness¹⁰ ... not only enough to deliberately include Peter by name in the message carried by the womenfolk to the disciples concerning the Risen Lord's intention to meet with them in Galilee¹¹ ... not only enough, soon after that, to appear to Peter privately to restore his communion with Himself¹² ... but, above anything else, that Jesus loved Him so much that He had been willing to suffer death on a cross that Peter might be, as he once put it himself, 'brought to God'.¹³

Small wonder then that Peter responded, 'Lord, you know that I love you'.

And this morning the burning question which faces each of us – as it once did Peter – is not how much we know – not how much we do – not how much we talk – not how much we give – but do we love the Lord Jesus? Do we love the One who first loved us and gave Himself for us. For every true believer loves the Lord Jesus. It was Peter himself who, writing later to Christians of his own day, said concerning the Saviour, 'whom having not seen *you love*'.¹⁴

As many of you know, Linda and I were in North Wales this time last week. There we saw some of the most beautiful scenery, flowers and birds. What we saw reminds me of the words of the great 18th century poet William Cowper ... 'God made the country, and man made the town'. It was this same writer who gave us a hymn which closes with the lines ...

Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love Thee, and adore:
O for grace to love Thee more!¹⁵

Footnotes

¹ John 1. 42.

² Matt. 16. 17.

³ Matt. 4. 18-19.

⁴ Mark 14. 71; John 18. 17, 25.

⁵ Luke 22. 33; John 13: 37.

⁶ Matt. 26. 33.

⁷ Compare other references in John's gospel to our Lord's knowledge; John 1. 48; 2. 24; 16. 30.

⁸ 1 John 4. 19.

⁹ Luke 22. 32.

¹⁰ Luke 22. 61.

¹¹ Mark 16. 7.

¹² Luke 24. 34; 1 Cor. 15. 5.

¹³ 1 Pet. 3. 18. It was Samuel Wesley (the father of John and Charles) who gave us the lines, 'O Lamb of God! was ever pain, Was ever love, like Thine?' I have no doubt Peter would have said a hearty 'Amen' to that!

¹⁴ 1 Pet. 1. 8.

¹⁵ 'Hark, my soul, it is the Lord!'