

Sermon for Sunday 30 June 2024 (Evensong) – Peter and Paul

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Psalm 16, Ezekiel 34.11-16, John 21.15-22

In the name of the divine Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

God says, I will seek out my sheep. I will feed them with justice. I can't start the sermon until I've said thank you so much to everyone for welcoming us back. It's lovely to be here again at Lavenham. I can't remember how many times I visited you in the last 19 years while I've been Dean of Caius, but I know it's quite a few, and it's always a joy and a privilege to share in worship with you. I will also say that in case any of you are wondering about the hymns choices for tonight, you have a choice in the Church of England on this festival weekend. You can celebrate St Peter on his own, or you can celebrate St Peter and St Paul. And although it's more Peter than Paul in the sermon tonight, I did think that Paul needed a shout out, which is why we sang that fantastic hymn just now. That's my self-justification for a nice treat over.

I'm going to speak to you mostly about St John's Gospel, the end of John's Gospel, which we just heard. Those words that we heard in the second lesson are almost the very end of the book. And there's a sense of *rückblick* about them, of a looking back, a sense of sadness as well as joy. What we're seeing in this story is part of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, but it is the end of the story of his friendship with Peter, at least as we know it in the Gospels. Jesus's time on Earth is almost over; he was only 33 or thereabouts. Peter, we learn from this, will die an an old man. Their lives were very different. Peter had begun his adult life, probably like his father and grandfather before him, as a fisherman. And three years before the moment in our gospel story, a man had come and said to him, 'Come with me, and I will make you fish for people.' And then began this marvellous friendship, which changed them and changes us too.

And at that moment, Jesus gave him a command, 'Follow me'. And Peter left his boat and followed Jesus. And here we are, right at the end of the gospel; and what does Jesus say to Peter? It's so important that he says it twice. He says, again, 'Follow me'. And that second call is echoing the first of three years before. If you think back to that first call, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people', it could have been an impulsive reaction. Peter was an impulsive man, we know that from his story in the scripture. Perhaps his life was boring. I have no idea how boring it actually is to be a fisherman in first century Palestine. I can't imagine it was that exciting, although it may have been stressful and sometimes dangerous. Perhaps he fished and earned his living and hoped for something more, something that would answer the needs of his soul as well as his body.

If so, that's the same kind of dilemma that faces all of us in our lives when we grow up and make our choices. And life choices are always stressful. We have to make life choices in our faith; nobody is actually born a Christian. We have to be baptised, confirmed, we have to share in the sacrament of the altar. But we have other choices to make. We have to choose what subjects we study at school. We have

to choose a university, if that's our path in life; and at the end of it, we have a job to choose. Then we are probably looking for a life partner and somewhere to live. The choices go on and on, and there are never any certainties in any of that.

I suspect that those three years that Peter spent with Jesus, right up until the crucifixion, must have been a thrilling self-discovery. But they weren't only about self-discovery. There were also elements of success, and perhaps more important and more formative, elements of failure. Peter learns as all of us learn, not just by accruing knowledge, but by making mistakes. The only way not to grow is not to risk making mistakes. And he's famous for two moments of learning that come to him, which are his privilege and which make him the chief of the Apostles. One, the famous one, we were reminded of it in the hymn at the beginning, comes at Caesarea Philippi. When Jesus says to the disciples, 'Who do **you** say that I am?' And Peter answers, 'You are the Messiah.' That vision, that enlightenment, is his gift to us as well as to his contemporaries.

But there's another moment, perhaps less famous, but equally important, in an event which only John's gospel records, the moment when Jesus, at the last supper, washed the feet of his disciples. And when he comes to Peter and says that he's going to wash Peter's feet, Peter says to him, in shock, 'Lord, you will never wash my feet.' And Jesus's answer is simple; 'If I do not wash you, Peter, you have no part in me.' And what does our impulsive chief of the Apostle's answer to that? He says, 'Then Lord, not my feet only, but my head and my hands also.' He is impulsive but impulsively generous, and his warmth is what makes him loved by Jesus. I'm sure he had visions and dreamed dreams and made promises. We all do all of those things. I don't know what the visions and dreams were, but I know the promise that he made. He made it to Jesus on the eve of his arrest. 'I will never deny you', he says. Three times, Jesus asked Peter on the eve of the crucifixion, and three times, three times others asked him about Jesus. And three times, Peter lied to cover up the fact that he knew Jesus, that he was Jesus's friend, that he'd followed him and believed in him. He lied, and he failed.

And this, a few days later, not many, because the time between the crucifixion and the ascension into heaven is not long, Here we are, just at the last moment of Jesus's earthly existence, and he shared breakfast with the disciples. And then he turns to Peter and he says to him, 'Do you love me?' And again, 'Do you love me?' And a third time, 'Do you love me?' Why three questions? It's simple; because there were three denials. Three times, Peter had said, 'I do not know him'. And here, Jesus gives him a chance not to repent and tell everyone how sorry he was and wear the badge of disgrace or a dunce's cap or any other mark of shame. He just asks him what really matters, 'Do you love me?' And Peter says, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' And when he says it, John tells us he was hurt. He was hurt because Jesus asked the third time, and it was that third time that clinched the proof for Peter, that he was being given a chance, that what he thought Jesus knew nothing about, at least in John's version, Jesus knew it all. Jesus knew the denials. But for Jesus, they didn't matter; all that mattered was that his dear friend, Peter, had a chance to say sorry and another chance to follow.

Peter is the prototype for all our vocations. Just now we prayed for people who've been ordained this weekend. It's a life-changing moment for all of them. And none of us who have been ordained to God's

ministry ever forget that moment when we were given the immense privilege and challenge of ministry among God's people. But he's not just a prototype for clergy, he's a prototype for all Christians because we all have a calling to discipleship, to baptism and confirmation, and Holy Communion. Many of us, not all but most, have a vocation to relationship through Holy Matrimony. And a few of us, admittedly a peculiar few, have a vocation to service in the ministry. With each vocation, we commit ourselves to what is completely unknown to us. We make promises, having no idea of what it will be like to have them fulfilled.

And will all of us meet temptation to let go? Another St John, in the Revelation Chapter 2, warns us about the risks of letting go the love we had at first. I always remember that phrase, Do not let go the love you had at first. And that could be for your life partner, or your children, or your God. Do not let go the love you had at first, because as this gospel teaches us, we will get second chances. And if we muff those, we'll get third chances, and seventy times seven is not enough for the forgiveness that God will offer us in Jesus Christ.

So, those three questions, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' They undo Peter's denials, but they also undo ours. And they're a useful reminder that God doesn't want our perfection, but he does want our repentance. In another gospel, Jesus says, 'It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' It's only those of us who know our weakness and our failures in the sight of God, who are ready to come before him in prayer and to worship him. Peter became a mighty leader in the Church. He became the first Bishop of Rome. He set the template for all Christian leadership, as Jesus himself had in a very different way. We may live a short life like Jesus, who died at the age of about 33, or we may live like Peter into an old age, which might become frail, lacking in autonomy and under the control of other people, as old age sometimes must.

Gospel success is not always doing great things for God. Sometimes it is as simple as letting go and letting another hand gird you and lead you, even if you yourself would rather, like Peter, go somewhere else. Success can simply be keeping going. So I think that you people of Lavenham are greatly blessed to have Peter and Paul as your patron saints. They remind you that there's nothing that you do, nothing that any of us do, or can do, that will ever set us beyond the love of God in Christ. Amen.