

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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GROWING UP IN FAITH

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John 21:1-24

Last week we read what seems pretty clear was intended to be the end of the Gospel of John. We read that *"Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:30-31) It is a good ending for the gospel, it sums up what John hopes will be the effect of reading his words, it echoes nicely the beginning of his work where he talks of all who receive Jesus, who believe in his name being given the power to become children of God.

So why is that not the end of the gospel? Why do we have this little appendix which we read today? We don't know, of course, but I wonder if it were not written at least in part because John or his community, have heard news of the death of Peter.

Peter is generally believed to have been martyred in Rome in the persecution of Christians under the emperor Nero, in around A.D. 67 or 68. The early church historian Origen says that he asked to be crucified upside down, as he was not worthy to be put to death in the same way as his Lord. It is thought that Paul also perished around the same time.

There were no news bulletins in those days, but nevertheless the news would have spread through the Christian Church fairly rapidly, as word was sent from one Christian community to another. And this was Peter. John's gospel does not give Peter a very high profile, but the other gospels do. This was Peter, who had been leader of the first church in Jerusalem, and who had ended up helping set up the church in Rome, moving the centre of the church to the centre of the empire. Peter had been a big figure in the early days of the church. He was arguably a bigger figure than Paul, although we have less written about him in Scripture after Paul comes on the scene. Peter had died and what did that mean for the church?

And so John's gospel got a second ending telling one of the as yet unrecorded stories about the resurrection.

It is a funny story in many ways. Maybe that is why John didn't use it at first. It shows the Apostles at a loose end in the days following Easter. What were they meant to do, where were they meant to go? How were they meant to live? A group of them have gathered by the sea of Galilee, and Peter cannot resist the lure of the water and his former skill and calling. He says he is going fishing and the rest agree to come with him. That would have been quite a boat-full! We know that usually there were two men

in the fishing boats – we know that because when Jesus called his disciples to follow him, we find Peter and Andrew in one boat and James and John in another. But now Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John and two others all pile into the boat to go out on the water. Some of them knew what they were doing but the rest must have just gone for the ride and probably got in the way of the experts. Perhaps it is no wonder that they fished all night but caught nothing. Perhaps the noise of the party in the boat drove the fish away!

And then in the morning they see the figure on the shore and he asks about their catch, and when they do as he suggests they get a huge catch of fish. For Peter and the other fisher-men it is déjà vu all over again. So Peter puts on his clothes. He puts them on before plunging into the water – the opposite of what most people would do. I told you this was a funny story. And he gets to shore and is just so excited to see Jesus.

But then after breakfast Jesus has a talk with Peter. You see, it is time that he grew up. He would always be Peter, always inclined to speak or act and then think, but he couldn't keep lurching from one thing to another, not if he was to really be Peter, the rock-man.

The first of Jesus' questions is about Peter's priorities. "Do you love me more than these?" Of course John doesn't tell us what the "these" are, but it is either the disciples or the fish! Do you love me more than your friends? Do I come first? Do you love me more than the things you grew up with, more than your security? Do I come first? I am quite glad that we can't know just what Jesus pointed at when he said "these", because the question can come now to each one of us, with whatever threatens to stand in the way of Jesus in our lives. Your family – do you love me more than these? Your friends and their opinion of you – do you love me more than these? Your golf clubs – do you love me more than these? Your gardening tools – do you love me more than these? The trappings and securities of your work or your home – do you love me more than these? If Peter is, and if we are to grow up as Christians we need to know what our priority is.

Once we know what it is we will be able to be of use, we will be able to feed the lambs, the helpless, less sure ones. It is not just the minister or the minister and the elders who are called to feed the lambs, but all of God's children.

The next question is simply about Peter's relationship with his Lord. "Do you love me." Not more than this or in comparison with that, but simply and truly, do you love me? It is the question that Jesus asks of each one of us. Do we love him, is that what is at the root of our lives, love for our Lord? And Peter can answer it as simply as it is asked "yes, Lord, you know that I love you." No prevaricating, no shying away from that complicated word "love". A simple, true answer to a simple, deep question.

And those who can say that truly are the ones that Jesus can ask to tend his sheep. We can only tend others if the motivation in our lives is love for God which spills over into love for others.

And then Jesus asks that second question again, a third time. And Peter is hurt, because it seems that Jesus is doubting him. But he had hurt Jesus by denying him three times, and to make it right, to show him the reality of Jesus' forgiveness for him, he is going to be given the chance to counter-say all three denials. Peter is hurt, but

this third question comes with pastoral intent. Sometimes we have to know that we are forgiven, sometimes we need the chance to say or do things that show our repentance. Sometimes we need to say something more than once to know that we really mean it and to know that we are heard. Peter needs to hear himself tell of his love for Jesus more than once. It will calm him down, it will help him focus. Jesus is going to want Peter to grow up and he needs him to listen to what he says.

It is because Peter is so sure that he loves his Lord, and because Jesus has helped him repeat it, slow down and focus that he is now able to hear what Jesus has to tell him. He talks of him as a young man, free, impulsive – fastening his own belt and going where he wanted. That was who he was when Jesus first met him, in this same spot, and called him to follow. But he will not always be that impulsive young man. He will grow older, as we all do, and if he grows older following Jesus it will not always mean that he likes what happens to him. They will fasten a belt round him and take him where he does not want to go.

John explains that this was Jesus' way of indicating that Peter would die a martyr's death. I think that if Origen is right about Peter asking for his execution to be done upside down that proves to us that the Peter who grew up, who formed and led the church, who took on new ideas, was at heart still the same man who Jesus first met by the lake-side. Is it not the request of an impulsive, whole-hearted enthusiast that his death should be even less dignified than that of his Lord?

All of us are called on to grow as Christians and to grow up. When we first believe things are exciting and kaleidoscopic and sometimes a bit chaotic, and we tend to follow our feelings. There are always days and moments of intense joy in the Christian life, but if we are really to follow Jesus there will also be times when it will feel as though someone else has put a belt around us and is leading us where we do not want to go.

For some of us it is into bereavement or ill-health. These things come to many people, Christian or not, but we are not protected from them, and who would choose to go there? For some of us our faith will lose us friends, or the sympathy of family members. For some of us it can make us the source of unkind laughter. For some Christians, of course, it can lead to real and fierce persecution, as it was to in the days when Peter lost his life. For some it can be into places of responsibility in the Church, which we had never really aspired to, and which we would rather not have to do. But Jesus is still with us, even when it does not seem so. And if our love for him is our motivation, then he will work things out for his glory.

John wants us to know that Peter was called on to feed the sheep and the lambs and that he did what was asked of him. John wants us to know that although in the end Peter had to face what he would rather not have faced – just as Jesus himself did – yet because he loved his Lord and followed him that too was for the glory of God.

The early church would be distraught when they heard of Peter's death. But John wants them and us to know that things will not always be exciting, and happy and kaleidoscopic as we follow Jesus. They weren't always that way for him. But we have to grow up and go on. If we follow in love, doing good, showing love to those we can, following our Lord, then even the reverses of life, even the roads on which we would rather not travel can be for the glory of God. Amen