

3rd of Easter, Eucharist, John 21.1-19

I've almost given up guided retreats, at least the sort where you get a Bible reading to meditate on and then have to report to a spiritual director about what happened as you meditated on it. This is because I almost invariably get given stories about St Peter - Peter who claimed undying loyalty to Jesus, but who of all the disciples let him down most horribly.

You may remember the scene where Peter denies Jesus three times being acted out outside the Law Courts in Winchester on that cold Good Friday of two years ago. I was asked to write some meditations for the programme on the characters; and, guess what, I chose Peter as one of them!

In it he said,

I love him to death, actually. Well, now I can say that honestly, I think. You can never be sure till it comes to the crunch. And looking back I can see he was testing me long before we got that far. Even calling me "Rock" was a challenge. What a name to live up to, especially for someone as impetuous as me.

But the trouble with Jesus was that he was unpredictable. Even a meal could be a lesson. What would you do if your leader suddenly got up from the table and started doing a slave's work? Washing our feet - I couldn't make head nor tail of it. But there he was starting with mine, saying he had to do it. I tried to duck out, but there was no escape. I still look at my feet and wonder why he wanted to bend so low.

The servant girl caught me off guard, too, outside the High Priest's house. I still wince at my betrayal. God knows, I was only trying to protect myself. I got away as fast as my feet would carry me - my dirty feet, doing exactly the opposite to what I'd hoped and promised.

Since then I've had plenty of time for tears, thinking of the place where our paths uncrossed. But I hope against hope that he'll give me one last chance to follow in his steps - however, wherever he wills - and this time right to the end.

Peter's sense of failure, I believe, opened him to a new start, but after Jesus' crucifixion there seemed no way he could find one. But one of the joys of the resurrection stories in John's Gospel is Peter's rehabilitation. First you get the story of the race to the tomb, where Peter sees the linen wrappings lying; then, Jesus steps into a locked room, breathing the gift of the Holy Spirit on Peter and the others; and finally we come to the story of our gospel reading, where the disciples all go fishing.

It's a curious scene. It reads as if we are back with the disciples at the beginning - BC, as it were. Peter takes the lead in setting out on a fishing expedition on the Sea of Tiberias, and the rest follow. Nothing gets caught all the following night - their work is ordinary and unfruitful, till the stranger appears on the shores, and their nets and bellies are filled. Jesus' presence completely changes the colour of the scene: they regroup around him and the charcoal fire he has made for their meal.

After breakfast Peter alone is the focus of attention. Before we remember what was actually said, let's imagine what *we* might

have said if we'd had the opportunity to confront Peter? I certainly would have wanted him to have realised just how badly he'd let me down. I would have focused on his failure until I was sure he really sorry - sorry enough to change.

That's not Jesus' way. He looks into Peter's heart for love, not sorrow. That's the question he presses three times, to match the three denials made Peter at the earlier charcoal fire before the High Priest's house: Do you love me?

He gives Peter the opportunity to profess the love in his heart, and it's a love changed in two ways, stripped of illusion by failure and strengthened by the presence of Jesus who had not been defeated by Peter's failure. The resurrection allows a tender shoot of truth to emerge from the ashes of Peter's past efforts to be faithful.

It would be remiss of me to stay with personal when so much is at stake in the political realm. Perhaps, like me, many of you watched the first of the debates between the three main parties. Now, I am not going to suggest who you should vote for, but I suggest that we avoid the thinking that seems to score easy points - the old is tarnished, jaded, beyond repair, *all* we need now is the new and different.

Vote for us - we are outside the old two-party system; vote for us - we are the party of change; vote for us - we've got new and improved policies to replace the ones you've been enjoying for the last 13 years! All these are, I suggest, electoral tactics which divert us from what matters - values, which are going to be

tested against the realities of the toughest recession for at least a generation. We must look harder to see the truth.

Jesus sets the truth of Peter's profession of love against the future - you will not have it easy, you will have to show your love by being led where you do not wish to go. And isn't this the political process too? 'Events dear boy, events', as Macmillan is reputed to have said when asked what is most likely to blow a Government off course, as we know so well from Iraq, the sub-prime crisis and the like.

The question we have to ask is not who can give us change, novelty or difference, but who can hold to their values when the drift of events is against them, when they are tested or tempted to divert from them. That is why the expenses scandal still hangs over Parliament: it has rendered the values of all politicians suspect. Do you love me? Or do you love yourself?

It's the same in the Church. We had an email from the Congo last week: one of the bishops had to plead for his life before potential assassins, and was only spared when he offered them money. The government had done nothing to protect him. We do not live with that sort of testing, so we should be grateful as well much as concerned with those who do - and perhaps less sensitive about the discrimination that may occasionally befall Christians in contemporary society. Let's earn respect by living resurrection hope and not being dismayed or deflected by the first sign of resistance to our beliefs and values.

The question Jesus asks Peter is the resurrection question: Do you love me? Love belongs to the God's new world, and under the banner of love shelter a whole set of values pertaining to love - freedom and responsibility, justice and opportunity. Our task as individuals, as members of the Church, citizens and voters is to live for love and not let past failures, whether ours or other people's, be the last word in how we intend to live or judge others.

We look forward to the future, and as we put our trust in the risen Christ, we hear his amazing vote of trust in us and our best values: Feed my sheep! Nourish my people with your unstinting service, and let events that threaten to blow you off course be the very occasions that you prove yourself most steadfast.