



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Easter-Year C-May 5th 2019

***Readings: Acts 5: 27-32 40-41, Psalm 29, Apocalypse 5: 11-14,
John 21: 1-14***

A few years ago I was sitting in a restaurant in Fowey after a hard morning clearing bamboo in the Retreat House garden. The new African waitress brought me the menu. I received it enthusiastically and commented, ‘Thanks, I’m absolutely starving.’ There was an unexpectedly hostile pause before she drew herself up to her full height and unsmilingly condemned my trivialisation.

‘You are not starving’, she snarled, ‘you are hungry’.

With that she turned on her magisterial heel and set sail for the kitchen. She did not last long as a waitress but I have long remembered her fearless capacity for truth-telling and the casual and imprecise use we make of language. The precise meaning of words is at the heart of this morning’s Gospel.

We are in the season of the Resurrection. The scarcely believable horror and disappointment of the dereliction of hope that was Good Friday have been replaced by an astonishing revelation of the triumph of divine reality in the rising of Christ. What next?

There is much to do before the birth of the Church on Pentecost, not least with the designated management, the Apostles. Critical to all this is the matter of leadership – Peter. The shoreline encounter resonates

throughout the long history of the Church. Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him a difficult question. 'Do you love me?'

The English word, love, is a very loose term covering anything from 'I'd love an ice cream' to 'Darling I will love you til I die'. Same word – different emphasis. So, in Jesus' encounter with Peter, different words are used.

There are four words, in Greek, that define love more precisely than our vague English sloppiness. One is about loyalty, family commitment, community bonds, teamwork. But Jesus does not ask Peter if he will be loyal to the family of Faith, a good team player.

The second is the love that is concerned with erotic love, which, for the Greek can be anything from the purely carnal to the glorious fulfilment of married life to the excited joy in the company of a much loved companion. Jesus does not use this word either. In spite of some of the vicious nonsense of some 1960s commentators there is no suggestion of homoeroticism in the Apostolic band.

The word Jesus uses, to describe the loving response which He is seeking from Peter, is sacrificial kind of love. The Thayer Lexicon describes it beautifully when it says "to take pleasure in the thing, prize it above all other things, be unwilling to abandon it or do without it." It is a crazy love that will not let go. Agape loves, usually at cost to the bearer. Agape puts the beloved first and sacrifices pride, self interest and possessions for the sake of that beloved. This is the love that God has for us which inspired him to sacrifice His son and for His son to obey and sacrifice himself. It is the kind of love we are commanded to have for one another. It is a love of supreme greatness.

Peter replies using the fourth word for love. Yes, Lord, he says. I really like you. You are my friend. We are buddies. We are soul-mates. We are singing from the same hymn sheet.

And Jesus asks him again. Do you have this crazy love for me that overrides everything else? Do you mirror the sacrificial love of God? Are you prepared to be sacrificed? Will you make the whole journey with me? Again Peter responds – I really like you. You are my best buddy. I'm on your side. You can count on my enduring friendship.

And the third time Jesus asks him. 'Do you love me?' But this time Jesus modifies his question. He meets Peter by using the same word as Peter. It is as if he recognises that, at this stage, Peter is not ready for the ultimate sacrifice of love. OK – Are you my buddy, a member of my team, a soul mate?

And Peter stumbles, embarrassed, into his reserved answer again – Lord you know everything, you know how fond I am of you. Why do you keep asking?

Peter will finally answer Jesus' ultimate and original question on the Vatican Hill, upside down on a cross in humble and penitent imitation of his Master.

'Do you love me?' It's a good question for all disciples.

I can honestly say, with Peter, that I am very fond of Jesus. Indeed He is my best buddy. We sing from the same hymn sheet. We play for the same team – me as a player, Him as captain. Like Peter I'm comfortable with that. Jesus knows that I really like Him.

When seven years ago I went to Rome to buy the vestments that you had given me as an ordination gift, I bought a simple set. It had one unusual feature. On the stole the Cross on the neck was upside down. It is Peter's cross. And it reminds me, every time I put it on, that the question on the Galilee shoreline in the light of the Resurrection morning, in the wake of all my failures and follies, repentance and return, trying and, by His grace, trying again, the question echoes through my life and yours.

'Do you love me? I know you like me but do you love me?'

Somewhere, on the way to our own Vatican Hill, we will answer that. In the meantime we must faithfully feed His sheep.

