



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Easter – Year C

Do you love me?

Readings: Acts 5: 27-32, 40-41, Ps 29, Ap 5: 11-14, John 21: 1-19

'Do you love me or are you just extending goodwill?

Do you need me half as much as you say or are you just feeling guilt?

I've been hurt before and I know the score, how can I explain?

Are you willing to risk it all or is your love in vain?'

Not the Gospel today but Bob Dylan. I think it catches the mood.

On the Resurrection shoreline, Jesus asks Peter, 'Do you love me?'

In the vault beneath Vatican Hill, directly under the High Altar of St Peter's great basilica, lie a set of bones. They are wrapped in the remnants of some purple cloth and, DNA tested, belong to a first century man of about 70. Around this grave and focussing in on it are the graves of others, some containing requests for prayer for the soul from the figure in the centre. This fascinating discovery and configuration took place under the Papacy of Pius XII – as the Nazi menace swarmed over Europe and the Pope sought to hide Rome's Jews from the persecution and slaughter.

How could Peter have possibly imagined, as he and Andrew cast their nets on the little local waters of the Galilee, that his tumultuous journey would end here and that his response to the call of the shoreline Rabbi would see this sacred site become a magnet for mankind's pilgrimage and the centre of the authority of the Ecclesia of God?

We live in the light of the confirmation of history. Peter enjoyed no such comfort. He responded to Christ's call, misunderstood the implications, failed in courage at the first hurdle, was restored to his calling and went on, in the wake of the Pentecost, to fulfil his vocation to lead the Church and to be executed in the same way as His Lord miles from Galilee's little fishing villages in the dark heart of the pagan empire of Rome.

His, and the other members of the Apostolic band, looked initially to Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Their vision, insofar as one can ascertain, was of their places being in the Privy Council or Cabinet of the new ruler of an emancipated Israel. It certainly did not include the Via Dolorosa and the Cross.

So, here we stand this morning, in the cold light of history, reviewing the past and its implications for our future. On the beach by the barbecue, Peter's denial of Jesus on Maundy Thursday is reversed by Christ's painful interrogation. 'Do you love me?'

That, for all our failings and foibles and fantastical evasions and denials and disassociations from Christ, is the primary question that we have to answer. Both the great questions fall to Peter. Thus they fall also to us.

'Who do you say that I am?' and 'Do you love me?'
In our answer to them lies our future and our destiny.

We are not called to be Ministers in some earthly Cabinet of Prime Minister Jesus, but to be ministers of an eternal kingdom which is often at odds with the fallen and temporary and partial governance of Man. So we move from the cowardly denial in the courtyard of the High Priest to the embarrassing restoration on the beach to this morning's edit from the Acts of the Apostles. And edit it certainly is. It fails to mention a key part of the story. Now, newly emboldened and empowered by the Pentecost, the Church, in the persons of Peter and John have begun a healing ministry in addition to the preaching and teaching ministry. The authorities clamp down because the implications are that they were wrong to seek the death of Jesus, that, indeed, they are responsible for missing that moment in history when the Messiah came

and are guilty of extinguishing the hope of Israel. Nothing could be more threatening to their hold on power.

Hence the religious authorities ban any mention of Jesus. In response the Apostles refuse to put obedience to the state before obedience to God. They refuse point blank to recognise the authority of the religious governors over the revelation of Jesus. This is dangerous stuff. This is not mere academic debate or the inconsequential whim of personal preference. It is, as the evidence of the Gospel and the witness of Vatican Hill confirm, a matter of life and death. We are told, at the end of this edit from Acts, that the Apostles were glad to have 'had the honour' of suffering humiliation for the Lord. What honour was this? The edit excludes it. It is to have been publically whipped, the 39 lashes, a body wrecking, shuddering assault on the person with flesh tearing metal in the leather thongs. It was not uncommon for victims to die of shock or sepsis. 'GLAD?'

It is a turning point in the Gospel story. It is the moment when the Church knows that, if she is to be genuinely the Body of Christ on earth, then she will suffer as Christ did. That she will walk the Via Dolorosa with Him. That she marches to the beat of a different drum. That she cannot be a religion of the secular authorities, simply blessing the moral enormities of the State. That she is to be deeply counter-cultural, preferring eternity to modernity, preferring holiness to habit, preferring conviction to collaboration.

It is a path that inevitably leads to suffering but that suffering is in solidarity with Christ. It is, in the world's eyes, a humiliation – a putting down, a degradation of contempt by the powers of the dark. It is a way of the Cross. It reminds us of who we truly are, humbled, the animated dust of the earth. But it also encourages us because, walking in the way of Christ, we see the destiny of this quintessence of dust to be, in Jesus, transformed into the eternal.

We are not masochists. We do not queue up to volunteer for suffering. Christ Himself prayed that the cup of suffering be taken away. But He also prayed the supervening will of the Father. So it must be with us. When suffering comes it is not without redeeming purpose. It is the earnest of our solidarity with Christ.

When we suffer physically or suffer because we are at odds with the authorities of our time, we do not enjoy the pain or alienation BUT, with the Apostles, we accept the humiliation for Jesus' sake and are 'glad to have the honour of suffering for the sake of the Name'.

It is the first instalment of Peter's answer to the shoreline question of Jesus.
'Do you love me?'

2022 Fowey Retreat