

LEVIN UNITING CHURCH  
**SERMON NOTES**  
24 APRIL 2016

**Readings**

John 13:31-39

John 21:1-19

Three years ago I was in Rome, doing the Scavi Tour of St Peter's and the Vatican. If you ever get the chance to do it, take it. Scavi is simply Italian for ruins. It is a fantastic new tour which has to be booked well in advance and is for very small groups only. We were amongst the first to see some of the fantastic archaeology under the Vatican and the Basilica of St Peter, eventually coming up into the great Basilica itself. Our guide was a young English Seminarian whose faith shone through everything he said and did. For him the culmination of the tour was what he earnestly believed to be the tomb of St Peter. We were allowed into the small chamber one at a time. As we entered, he prayed for each of us.

We may not venerate Peter in quite the same way as our guide and many Catholics. We may not even believe that this was the site of his tomb BUT there is no doubt of what a central figure Peter is in our faith or of what a fascinating and very human character he is:

- An impetuous uneducated man (if you can ever describe as uneducated someone who has learned from Jesus himself)
- A man who denied Jesus three times, having said he would die for him
- Undoubtedly one of the most important leaders of the early church – although some would argue that James was the main leader
- A martyr who, legend has it, was crucified upside down for his faith

Peter is very much our focus for today – partly because one of our readings follows the one set for today in the lectionary and partly because it reminded me of a sermon I heard recently which really made an impact on me. I make no apologies for the lack of originality of incorporating some of that sermon from Julian Heyes of St Mary's into what I am going to say.

In our first reading we hear Peter brashly saying that he is willing to die for Jesus: not a statement to make lightly! Jesus, himself said, "Greater love has no man than this than that he lay down his life for his friends." It makes me think about what or who I might be willing to die for.

(I recently went to the Gallipoli exhibition at Te Papa – perhaps appropriate to mention it on the day before ANZAC Day. I was surprised and quite awe-struck as a mere Brit. A little like the Americans tend to think they won the Second World War, I as a mere Brit, had been brought up on the stories of British sacrifice and victory and was largely unaware of the scale of the Kiwi contribution: the largest percentage of population involved, the largest percentage of participants wounded and killed. I saw tear-jerking, heroic accounts of men laying down their lives for their comrades as well as for the wider cause. I am not sure I have ever felt strongly enough about my home country to have thought of fighting for it, so I find it hard to think of men putting themselves through all this for a colonial power at the far side of the world. I guess we never know how we will respond to a challenge until it happens. Perhaps that was as true of Peter as it is of us!)

In the gospel account between our two readings, we find Peter falling short of such bravado. Firstly in Gethsemane there is the account that one wag suggests makes Peter one of the three smallest men in the Bible (He sleeps in his watch!) and then the denial which Jesus had predicted.

By the time we reach our second reading, Jesus has begun to make his resurrection appearances, including that to Thomas, and Peter seems to have reverted to his old trade of fishing – for fish rather than men. It is this passage on which I should like to focus – but starting with the final part of our passage before moving back to its beginning.

In verse 15, Jesus seems to be testing Peter by asking him “Do you love me more than these others?” and then to show disbelief in Peter’s answer that indeed he does by repeating the question three times. There are some who believe that this is an echo of Peter’s three denials of Jesus. Rather than pick up on this, I would rather focus on two of the words used in the conversation.

You probably know that the Greek language has a number of words for love. There are two of them used in this passage. The first is usually pronounced in English as AGAPE. This is a very strong word, often used to refer to sacrificial love – the sort of love God has for us, and the type of love disciples of Jesus are called upon to have for one another in our first reading. The other is PHILEO, sometimes translated as brotherly love as in Philadelphia – the city of brotherly love.

In the first question of the dialogue, Jesus says to Peter “Do you AGAPE me?” Peter replies, “You know I PHILEO you”. Why? Well, it may be that this is just a linguistic quirk. John does use the two words slightly interchangeably in other parts of the gospel BUT perhaps there is more to it than this.

Is Peter backtracking somewhat on his earlier bravado? Is he saying “I love you but I am not sure I can go the whole way that you want me too?” Is he just being honest and realistic, saying, in effect, “I have over-promised in the past and feel foolish. I really don’t want to make that sort of mistake again.”

Jesus repeats his question “Peter, do you AGAPE me?” perhaps seeking the stronger response. Again, Peter replies “You know I PHILEO you.”

Jesus repeats his question for the third time – or does he? This time he asks “Peter, do you PHILEO me?” Peter answers again, “Lord, you know everything. You know I PHILEO you.”

What is going on here? I would like to suggest that there is something extraordinarily gracious in what Jesus says and something of real importance for us as well as for Peter.

Depending on your view of the Trinity, He does indeed know everything. He knows more about Peter than Peter himself does. Perhaps he can foresee that Peter will actually fulfil his earlier commitment and die as a martyr for his Lord. Legend has it that he was crucified upside down. He knows more about us than we ourselves do.

Perhaps in his third question he is saying to Peter, I will accept what you think you can give me, even if at this point you do not think you can offer the ultimate sacrificial love you once claimed to have for me. Perhaps he is saying to us. “I AGAPE you but I will accept you for what you are and what you feel you can offer at this stage in your life, knowing there is more to come.

Jesus demands much of us. “To whom much has been given, shall much be expected,” he says. Our songs today have, and will, reflect just how much he has given to us. Truly much should be expected

of us and yet he also says, “My yoke is easy.” He will not demand more of us than we can honestly give. What a wonderful thought!

Let’s go back briefly to the earlier part of the John 21 passage: the catching of the 153 fish (the number makes it sound very much like an eye-witness statement). Once again it illustrates Peter’s impetuous nature. Once again, Peter and the others see Jesus working miracles. Try to put yourself in Peter’s position here – and that of the other less well known characters.

What do you think might have happened next? Prof David Ford, whose DVD talks are part of the new Sunday Evening programme at St Mary’s, advises us to put ourselves into the biblical narrative whenever possible. What would the disciples have done next? What would we have done?

Think that through just for a moment.

Perhaps, when Jesus left the company that day, they simply went back to their fishing again. More likely, I think they would have been so amazed and overjoyed at seeing Jesus again and so full of excitement at the miracle he had performed that the whole district, all the neighbouring villages, would have known about it in a very short time. It’s not the sort of news you can keep to yourself. It would not have been a planned information or evangelistic campaign to tell them: rather it would have been the most natural thing in the world to want to share the excitement of their encounter with the risen Jesus.

Many, if not all, here will have had an exciting encounter with Jesus themselves. We’ve sung about it already “Amazing grace ... that saved a wretch like me” and we’ll sing about it again in our final hymn, “My chains fell off, my heart was free...”

If you are like the folk at my own church you will probably agonise about how to reach others with the Good News, how to be what we are called to be – the arms and legs of Jesus in twenty first century New Zealand. Perhaps a little impetuosity – like that of Peter – is called for. Perhaps our outreach needs to be more a natural outpouring of our own experience of God’s love and goodness.

You may remember the old chorus that included the words ‘My cup’s full and running over’. We occasionally changed the words to ‘My cup’s full and so’s my saucer’. Whatever we are full of, will overflow naturally to those around us!

In closing, be assured

- that God loves you with the sacrificial love we see at the cross
- that He loves you as you are, warts and all. My mother had a picture at home which carried the words “A real friend is one who knows the worst about you and loves you just the same.” God is just such a friend.
- that He still has the power and ability to transform lives – even Peter’s, even yours and even mine
- that He will never call you to offer more than you are able to offer or do more than you can do
- that we are called to share, naturally, the love and transformation we have experienced with those around us. Emil Brunner said, ‘The church lives by mission as a fire lives by burning’. It is the most natural thing in the world and yet sometimes it seems so hard.

*Steve Fowler*