

## The Future is not the same as the Past      Revd Huw Davies    May 24<sup>th</sup> 2020

This season is hard for people in many ways. We are facing challenges and uncertainties. In times like these we have an opportunity to come back to God, to depend on God, to find help, encouragement and guidance in the Scriptures, for that is why they were written. Romans ch.15:4    2 Timothy 3:16

In this chapter - John chapter 21 - it might be that Peter and the others were hoping to get back to some sort of normality, perhaps you are as well. We wonder what this “new normal” might be, because it will be different from the past. Just so, after Jesus’ resurrection from death nothing would be the same.

For Peter two huge things had happened - firstly, that he had come to see himself differently and secondly, he had come to see Jesus differently - two seismic shifts, paradigm shifts in his understanding of himself and the world.

Peter had come to think of himself as the strong one, that others could rely upon to cope in a time of difficulty. but in the end he buckled. He discovered that he wasn’t quite the man that he thought he was.

Three times Peter denied the Lord when Jesus was arrested and he was taken before the court for a false trial, it was there in the dark shadows of the courtyard firelight that Peter was asked “aren’t you one of his followers?” Peter said “No, I am not, I don’t know the man!” (Mark 14: 43-72).

You can sympathise with the man. Where he thought he was strong, when difficult days came, he crumbled. For some of us in this crisis, when our world is shifting, our jobs uncertain, when those that we love can be just so annoying, when everything is pressurising us and we find that our tempers are short, temptation is strong, we can find we are disappointed with ourselves and feel we are not the people we thought we were.

As others are rejoicing when Jesus was resurrected, Peter was feeling his heart and dreams were broken. Perhaps he was glad to just go back home to Galilee and to fishing - back to normal, back to what he understood. It is precisely here that the risen Jesus meets with him and restores him, not once or even twice but three times

In the early dawn morning, beside the sea of Galilee once the campfire has got going and breakfast is being cooked and eaten, Jesus takes Peter aside. Recognising the broken-heartedness of Peter, he speaks kindly and tenderly to him, there is no malice or blame or disappointment towards Peter in Jesus’ words (John 21:1-14)

Jesus asks Peter “Tell me Peter, do you love me more than anyone else...more than anything else?”

In greek, Jesus is using here a particular word for love - ‘agape’ - this is the love that goes beyond all other loves. There is nothing wrong with other loves e.g. to love fishing or golf, cars etc. but when your teenager takes the car out and prangs it against a lamppost how do you respond? Do you love your child more than you love your car? Is your first question “Darling are you alright?” or is it “What! What have you done to my car?” ‘Agape’ love is sacrificial, “There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” John.15:13

Peter has lost his arrogance. He says to Jesus “Lord, you know that I love you”. Peter uses a different word for love here – phileo - it means to love like a brother. This is what Peter said “Lord, I love you like a brother”

It is all that his broken heart and newfound humility would let him say.

In response Jesus simply says “feed my lambs - look after my children!”

Then Jesus asks Peter a second time “Peter do you ‘agape’ me? Do you love me more than anything else?”

Peter reaching into the brokenness and shame inside, remembering that night in the courtyard by the fire with the servants of the High Priest asking him “aren’t you one of Jesus’ followers?” and knowing that he had let himself and Jesus down, says “Lord, you know I do ‘phileo’ you”.

I believe Peter’s reply has a silent sub-text of anguish “Lord I know it is not all that it should be, nor what I want it to be, but I am also not all that I should be or want to be either. But I do love you.”

Jesus again says very gently and simply “Tend my sheep, take care of my people!”.

Then we can imagine the two men share a moment of peaceable quiet in which Peter battles with his inner struggle and pain of the past and experiences the healing presence of Jesus, his love, acceptance and grace.

Jesus leans forward and looking into Peter’s eyes say’s “Peter, do you really love (phileo)me?”

John records that Peter was hurt Peter was hurt because Jesus was basically saying, “you say you love me like a brother, do you really love me even that much?” (see Proverbs 17:17)

Peter says “you know all things Lord, you know I love you” We can imagine him saying “If I could I would say I ‘agape’ you, that you are the most important thing ever in my life but the memory of failure is still raw”.

Jesus looks so kindly upon Peter and says “Feed my sheep, take care of my people Peter”.

Indeed this is what Jesus said to Peter at the Last Supper when Peter had protested that he would never let Jesus down. Jesus spoke of his denial and his restoration “when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers.” Luke 22:31-34 see also 2 Corinthians 1:4

He then says words that must have brought both confusion and comfort to Peter since they spoke of a time in the future where Peter would demonstrate that “agape” love for Jesus.

“..when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him “Follow me!”

Really? could these words Jesus was now speaking about the strength and integrity of his character be true? For Peter, this broken-hearted man who has succumbed to temptation, to be **lifted up and restored by Jesus and to see that the future is not the same as the past, that there is a hope that the future will be different and that there is strength to be found in following Jesus.** It’s a lovely thing.

Peter now full of himself again turns around and seeing John close by says “Lord, what about him?” (John 21:21). Jesus maybe thinking “Peter, when will you learn!” He says “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? It’s none of your business. You must follow me the way I guide you! His life is his business not yours!”

What a restoration, what a loving Saviour we have. Such grace, such understanding, such hope!  
A tsunami had hit Peter, broken-hearted, the realisation that he didn’t know himself nor Jesus in the way he thought he did. Frightened and taken by surprise in the situation, he had let himself and everyone else down. Now he is restored by his risen Saviour, Friend and Lord. What a joy for him.  
He had returned to Galilee to discover that he was not going back to “normal”. Not even a “new normal!”  
There is no normal - there is a resurrected Jesus and there is a restored and renewed Peter.

When we open our hearts to the resurrected Jesus, to his Holy Spirit, we begin to experience His tenderness and loving-kindness. There can be a new view of myself and a new view of Jesus.  
This great hymn was written with that in mind: *Praise my soul the King of Heaven, to His feet thy tribute bring, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me His praise should sing? Hallelujah!*

Back to normal? No! Peter knew his weaknesses now. He was a stronger man, but not a hard man. He was discovering that he was not invulnerable, that he was not invincible. He had been nicknamed “Rocky” but the strength was not in himself, it was to be found in a Saviour who was strong. Feet of clay, he was a kinder man because of the experience of his brokenness.

Perhaps this season, this time of lockdown, of pandemic, this time of fear for our children or ourselves, concern for our health, employment, finances, realising that our life may not be all we hoped it would be, or perhaps as long as we thought it would be. Peter becomes less critical of the failure in others because he had recognised the failure and fear within himself.

In Jesus, Peter found a new life. It was a new adventure for him, there was a new world ahead of him and he was called to live not with a sense of failure but with a sense of adventure.  
What is this present crisis doing to us? To you? To me? What opportunities is it giving us? An opportunity to reassess ourselves? To be kinder to ourselves, to know that we are not always the strong one but there is One who is.

A nurse said to me a while ago “This virus is indiscriminate, it is not just taking the elderly and the vulnerable and those with underlying health problems, it is also sometimes taking the young and the healthy, it is unpredictable.”

Well it gives me pause to think, that I am not invulnerable. The pressures at home can draw out from me strength that I did not know that I had. But on my bad days, when I am ashamed by things I have said and done, when I lose my temper, when I let others down, then I find a Saviour who picks me up and gives me the chance to start afresh, to reassess, to lean on Him for a fresh start and to begin a new chapter of my life.

Not normal, not back to normal, not a new normal, but a new adventure, a new chapter, a new understanding of myself and of Him on Whom I lean and trust.

I pray that you will also know His presence, His peace and His power in your home and personal lives this week.

With best wishes      Huw

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