Homily – 3rd Sunday of Easter (C)

*Acts 5:27-32, 40-41; Rev. 5:11-14 & Jn.21:1-19*

Of all the questions which Jesus *could* have asked Peter at their meeting after breakfast on that Easter morning, none could – I suspect – have surprised Peter more than those three questions we have just heard in today’s gospel.

Just think for a moment of all that has happened to him in the last few weeks. After 3 years of friendship with Jesus, a friendship so close that Jesus even has a nickname for him – Peter, the “Rock” – he has watched his friend arrested by the Jewish authorities, dragged before the Roman Governor, and condemned to death. Perhaps Peter and the others stood afar off to see how things would end, leaving only Jesus’ mother and one of the 12 at the foot of the Cross. No matter, by evening they all knew very well that he was dead. And then the strange story from Mary that she had found his tomb empty in the garden, and the morning run to see if it was true – only to find the empty grave and the linens carefully folded where his body had once been. And then there was that same evening – an evening when he had come and talked with them, and breathed on them, saying that it was the Holy Spirit, and telling them that now they had the power to forgive sins, to bind earth and heaven, just as once they had had power over demons when he sent them out ahead of him. A week had gone by, a week of hiding and fear, a week when only Thomas was brave enough to sneak out after dark to get some food, to learn some news from those in the city, to check if the coast was clear yet. A week had passed and he came again – and this time it is Thomas, not Peter, who touches him, touches his wounds, and says the words which go even further than Peter’s had at Caesarea Philippi: “My Lord and my God”!

And deep in Peter’s heart there is the gnawing truth which only he knows. Deep in Peter’s heart there is the knowledge that Judas was not the only one to have betrayed Jesus. Perhaps he tried to rationalise it to himself. His three-fold disowning of Jesus had, after all, come too late to make much difference – the damage had already been done by then. What difference could his terrified protestation “I do not know the man” have really made when all was said and done. But whenever he did that, whenever he made those excuses for his betrayal, his running away, his fear of the pain and torment he left his friend to carry alone, he remembered that look that Jesus had given him, and the tears came again.

Amidst all this confusion – the pain of his loss of Jesus his friend, the amazement at his resurrection, the strange words he has spoken to them all – there is a silence between Jesus and Peter; in that upper room, they do not speak with each other. Perhaps Peter is too ashamed even to look Jesus in the face. Perhaps he is just too afraid that Jesus will tell the others that his prophecy had come true, that Peter had indeed betrayed him before cock-crow. He had been the Rock – what was he now?

And so Peter does what most people do in such circumstances – he tries to return to normal, to go back to the familiar. “I’m going fishing” he says – as if the return to Galilee, the return to his old job will help him make sense of all that has happened. He no longer really knows who he is, so he becomes the fisherman again. Yet, even now, Jesus will not leave him alone. After a night’s frustration, a stranger on the shore comes to the aid of the fishermen, and leads them to a truly amazing catch. And at once, John knows who it is – “It is the Lord” he says to Peter. And then something incredible happens. Without a thought, certainly against all common sense, Peter reacts – and leaps from the boat to meet his friend, to meet the one he had betrayed, to meet the one who had so changed his life that fishing could never be the answer again.

And after breakfast, they talk together for the first time. Jesus is quite solemn. He calls Peter Simon – his “proper” name – and asks those three questions: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And of course, he already knows the answer. Peter’s shamed silence in the upper room had already told him. Still more, Peter’s impulsive leap into the sea to come and greet him had already told him more eloquently than any words could. Yet still he asks, three times, once for each betrayal. They are not the questions Peter dreads: Why did you betray me? Where were you when I needed you? How could you do that to me? Rather, they are the questions – or better, it is *the* question which is the only one which really matters now: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And all Peter can do is speak the truth, that truth which his instinct and actions acknowledged even before his mind did: “Lord, you know everything, you *know* that I love you”.

And those three affirmations of love – like any true words of love – do not come cheap. After each one, Jesus gives Peter a new task, a new commission. He is no longer to be just the “Rock” – a stable if somewhat unexciting and un-dynamic role. No. He is now to be the shepherd, the one who cares for and feeds the sheep, who tends the lambs. He has heard Jesus speak of the shepherd before – the one who is true to his flock, the one who bandages their wounds when wolves attack, the one who lays down his life for the flock. And now Jesus asks that of him, despite all that has gone before. As if to emphasise the point, Jesus goes on to prophesy Peter’s own future martyrdom, and seals his words with that simple command: “Follow me”. Peter must have been dumbfounded. 10 minutes before, all had seemed wrecked – he could see nothing beyond his own betrayal and his shame. And now here was his Lord and his friend giving him a new identity, showing him his future path, giving him new life. And Peter never looked back.

A few days ago, one of the brethren asked a question in his homily at Mass. How come, he said, we seem so much better at Lent and penance than we are at the joy of Easter? It is a hard question, a very real question. But perhaps Peter is something of an example for us here. For I think that for many of us too, we are still the Peter who decided to go fishing, still the Peter who was aware of his betrayal, still the Peter who knows and hides the secret guilt. We are not yet, or, perhaps better, not yet fully the Peter who talks with the Lord after breakfast, and who finds his life turned completely upside down yet again. Perhaps today, perhaps on this Easter morning, as we too come to take the food which Jesus has prepared for us, perhaps we too will hear his question echo in our hearts: Do you love me? And if we can answer as Peter did – no matter how clumsy or muddle-headed or filled with doubt our answer may be – then we too will be transformed, will find the new identity that Christ offers each one of us, will find the strength to pay the price that new identity will bring. And if the answer comes, like Peter’s, from the heart: “Lord, you know everything; you know I love you” then our hearts too will truly be filled with the joy of the risen Christ. May it be so for each one of us. Amen.

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10.4.16

Bidding Prayers – 3rd Sunday of Easter

Intro: Fr Oswald

*D:* Let us pray for the Church throughout the world: we pray especially for our Holy Father Pope Francis, Peter’s successor, and for our bishops, the successors of the Apostles. May they always be fearless and bold preachers of the Gospel and truly compassionate shepherds to the flock of Christ.

Lord, in your mercy…

Let us pray for Christian families:

Let us pray for all those who seek to follow Christ’s pattern of love in family life, in faithfulness, in self-sacrifice and in patience. Let us pray also for all who find their family life difficult, or who feel excluded and marginalised. May we all learn to be compassionate, as our heavenly Father is compassionate.

Lord, in your mercy…

Let us pray for peace in our troubled world:

May Christ the Prince of peace send his Spirit of reconciliation into the hearts of all people, to bind all nations into one family where all may live in harmony, justice and peace. We pray especially for areas of conflict, and for all those driven from home and family by violence, poverty and persecution.

Lord, in your mercy…

Let us pray for ourselves, and for those who are dear to us:

May the risen Christ bring us both joy and confidence as we seek to follow him in the daily pattern of our lives. Let us thank him for all the blessings we have received, and ask him for the strength we need to follow him more nearly.

Lord, in your mercy…

Let us ask Mary, mother of God and Help of Christians to pray with us and for us as we say: ***Hail Mary…***