

Two Loved Disciples

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Preacher: Rod McArdle

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of April 2005.

The preacher is Rob McArdle. His sermon is entitled Two Loved Disciples and is based on John chapter 21 verses 15 to 24.

...reported on Easter Saturday, March the 26th, statements made by a prominent Perth church leader.

These were some of his statements. Quote, the idea of God suffering and dying to pay off some fictional debt makes a travesty of God. Our God isn't a God who needs satisfying.

Whether we're repentant, unrepentant, whether we ask for forgiveness or not, God couldn't care less. False shepherds.

[1 : 02] As we sing that opening chorus at the end of the service tonight, Before the Throne of God, you might reflect on those words and wonder if that prominent church leader had that song sung on Good Friday morning.

In the prophet Ezekiel's time, God had strong words of condemnation for false shepherds. False shepherds who proclaimed, who declared falsehoods.

Let me read these words from Ezekiel 34 if you'd like to follow along. It's page 702 in the Old Testament. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel. Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Are you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves? Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

You eat the fat. You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fatlings. But you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak. You have not healed the sick. You have not bound up the injured.

[2 : 04] You have not brought back the strayed. You have not sought the lost. But with force and harshness you have ruled them. Thus says the Lord in verse 10, I am against the shepherds.

False shepherds, heretical shepherds, wolves in sheep's clothing. What a blight they are on the church. Throughout scripture this imagery of the shepherd is used to portray the qualities that are needed for and the functions of pastoral care of God's people.

And of course in doing that it highlights false shepherds. And this imagery of shepherding is steeped in the land of Palestine because sheep were and are totally dependent on their shepherds. They were dependent for protection, for grazing, for watering, for sheltering, for tending to their injuries. And the shepherds were providers. They were guides. They were protectors.

They were in fact the constant companions of the sheep. And they were figures of leadership and they were figures of authority for the sheep under their care. And both the Old and the New Testaments attest to God as the divine shepherd.

[3 : 18] He's the divine shepherd of us as individuals and us as the flock, as the people of God. The Lord acts as our provider. He acts as our protector. He acts as our guide.

In Ezekiel 20 we read that God knows each one that enters the sheepfold. In Isaiah 40 the image of God carrying his lambs. He seeks the lost.

He brings back the straight. He binds up the injured and he strengthens the weak. As it goes on in the chapter 34 of Ezekiel. And he provides for his own in that wonderful psalm, Psalm 23.

But that picture I want to suggest is even sharper with the portrayal of Jesus as the divine shepherd. In Ezekiel 37 Jesus is prophesied as the Messiah shepherd.

And that prophecy was then fulfilled in the incarnation as we read in Matthew chapter 2. And Jesus is the shepherd of the abandoned, of the scattered people. The ones for whom he cares.

[4 : 18] The ones for whom he gathers. Hear these words from Matthew 9. Then Jesus went about all the cities and the villages teaching in their synagogues. And proclaiming the good news of the

kingdom. And curing every disease and every sickness.

And when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them. Because they were harassed and helpless. They were like sheep without a shepherd. And then he said to his disciples.

The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

So Jesus he goes out and he searches for the lost. That's what we read in Matthew 18. Jesus calls each sheep by its name. And the sheep know his voice.

He preserves their life and in fact he gives them eternal life in that wonderful imagery that comes through in John chapter 10. And so this rich teaching in both the Old and the New Testament.

[5 : 17] If you like it sets the theological context for this second half of John 21. The last part of the Gospel of John. And if you were here with us last Sunday night you recall that John 21 acts if you like as an epilogue to the Gospel of John.

It provides teaching on the mission of the church and our responsibilities. Seven of the disciples have come together. They've gathered at the Sea of Galilee. And they've gone there in obedience to the Lord's instruction.

The instruction he gave them after the resurrection. To go there and wait for him. Well, while they wait they go and embark on this most unsuccessful fishing trip. But the Lord appears on the shore and he directs them to cast their net on the other side of the boat.

Then there's this stunning catch of 153 fish. And in that miracle it's a very practical lesson about discipleship, about mission.

Because Jesus had previously told them that without him they could do nothing. Nothing of eternal worth without him. So when all of the disciples reach the shore, most in the boat, Peter swimming.

[6 : 32] Jesus invites them to breakfast. Barbecued fish and bread. And you might like to turn to page 884 and follow through this passage. Reading from verse 15.

John tells us that when they'd finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, yes Lord, you know that I love you.

Jesus said to him, feed my lambs. A second time he said to him, Simon, son of John, do you love me? And he said to him, yes Lord, you know that I love you.

And Jesus said to him, tend my sheep. And he said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Understandably I think Peter's pretty hurt that Jesus would find it necessary to ask him three times.

And Peter responds for the third time. He says, Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you. It's a compelling scene, isn't it? As we enter into that in our mind's eye.

[7 : 37] Peter, the disciple who back in chapter 13 of this gospel had stated, Lord, I'll lay down my very life for you. Only of course subsequently to deny the Lord three times at his trial as we read in John 18.

So Peter, the impulsive disciple. Peter, the disciple who acts before he thinks. Peter, the fallen disciple.

And we as readers of this marvelous gospel, if you like, are privy to this loving, gracious restoration of Peter by the Lord. And this barbecue scene provides a parallel with Peter's three times denial of Jesus.

I mean, both of these scenes took place besides a charcoal fire. One in the courtyard of the high priest. Denial. This one by the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee.

Peter requested to affirm his love for the Lord. Two different words, some of you will be aware, are used in the passage for love. And these two words are used in those three questions.

[8 : 49] There isn't any special meaning that's attached to using those different words. John, as this has been recorded, has it there for, if you like, rhetorical variation, for rhetorical impact.

In fact, throughout the gospel of John, both of those Greek verbs are used interchangeably. In fact, both words are used to describe God the Father's love for the Son.

In the first question, Jesus asks, do you love me more than these? And it immediately raises the question for us, well, what does he mean by these? It could refer to, I mean, do you love me more than the other disciples?

Or it could be, do you love me more than the business of fishing? Or perhaps, do you love me more than these men do? Of course, at one level, all of those three are true.

But given this earlier claim by Peter, back in chapter 13, of his unwavering love for the Lord, even to the point of death, I think it seems that the thrust of Jesus' question is something like this, Peter, do you love me more than the other disciples do?

[9 : 56] That is, you've made these great big statements in the past. Are you going to live up to them? Are you prepared to die for my mission?

Jesus is testing. He's confirming Peter. And we see that particularly in verse 18. But notice Peter's response to the first question. Because he doesn't actually go in and talk about his love relative to the rest of the disciples.

Rather, he appeals to Jesus' knowledge. He says, you know that I love you. And Jesus accepts Peter's declaration. And I imagine that was just an enormous relief to Peter.

And then Jesus commissions him, feed my lambs. You see, Peter's love for his Lord, the evidence that Peter has been restored, that he's been reinstated, both of those are going to be displayed in Peter's pastoral care for the flock, for the children of God, for the church.

And Jesus commissions Peter, of course, two more times. And there isn't any particular significance between the use of lambs and sheep in the passage. And what is Peter's pastoral care?

[11 : 05] Well, he is to feed the flock. He's to tend the flock. They're actually doing words, aren't they? They're not words that are describing some sort of status that Peter has.

And perhaps there is a bit of a difference between those two words, feeding and tending. Feed is used in the Old Testament in Genesis 29 and 37, describing the pasturing of flock.

And then it's picked up in Ezekiel 34, part of which we've already read, for pasturing God's flock.

And the word tend tends to be used, excuse the pun, for duties of a shepherd, a more encompassing word.

So what does a shepherd do then? Well, this biblical imagery of shepherding is very rich in pastoral care meaning. And it encompasses at least these aspects.

It encompasses evangelism. Bringing back strays, searching for the lost. That's part of the breadth of this idea of shepherding and pastoral care.

[12 : 08] It certainly encompasses feeding and protecting the flock. And we see that in teaching and all the various forms of word ministry, whether that's in home groups, one-on-one discipleship, preaching, whatever those forms, teaching for both feeding and protecting the flock.

It encompasses pastoral counselling, strengthening the weak. And it encompasses healing the brokenhearted and healing the broken bodied. I'm sure you agree with me.

This image is one of the most powerful models, one of the most powerful images in Scripture about pastoral care. And pastoral care, in the breadth of its term, is actually a calling for each one of us as God's children.

I mean, of course there will be those who the Holy Spirit has gifted as evangelists or gifted as teachers. But Ephesians 4 emphasises that all of God's children are to be involved in the work of ministry.

I mean, sheep are prone to wander and we have to look after each other and we have to encourage each other. So the idea in my mind is one of us all serving the Lord, but within that there are some who will be called to be leaders, some who are called, if you like, to be coaches.

[13 : 28] But there isn't the idea of primacy. In the last week, of course, we've witnessed this extraordinary outpouring of grief and respect for Pope John Paul II.

And I think we can say already with great confidence that history will judge him as one of the great popes of the Catholic Church. He was a man who clearly had many wonderful qualities, attested by so many.

I think it's appropriate then for me to say just a few words about this passage, because this passage is often cited in respect of the papacy. There's nothing in the passage that suggests a distinctive authority for Peter.

Peter is being restored to service. It's not that he's being elevated to primacy. He isn't being charged to be Christ's vicar, nor to be the chief shepherd.

In fact, it's Peter himself who calls Jesus the chief shepherd in his first letter, 1 Peter chapter 5. And in that passage, Peter places himself alongside, not above, alongside other shepherds of God's flock.

[14 : 42] Let me read some of those verses at the beginning of chapter 5 of 1 Peter. Peter writes, And when the chief shepherd appears, you'll win the crown of glory that never fades away.

In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders, and all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another. For God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

I mean, just as we think about those wonderful words from 1 Peter, we see that at the end, towards the end of Peter's life, as recorded in his first and second letters, there's much evidence, isn't there, that Peter, impulsive Peter, Peter, the great swimmer.

Peter has obeyed. He has taken on board the lessons that Jesus had taught him over the years, and particularly on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, beside a charcoal fire.

Peter is a wonderful example of servant leadership. God's people, we need to be self-sacrificed. We need to be self-giving servants. And that, of course, is especially true for those of us who are involved in spiritual leadership.

[16:18] And so these three questions and the responses in verses 15 to 17, they act as a parallel with Peter's three denials. But more than that, they're also most appropriate, given what awaits Peter in the future.

Look with me at verse 18. Very, very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished.

But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. And that expression, stretch out your hands, was widely understood in the ancient world as referring to crucifixion because the stretching out of a condemned man was being tied to that horizontal crossbar which was then apportioned or affixed to a vertical post forming a cross.

So Jesus is referring to martyrdom by crucifixion. Raises the question, though, did Peter understand that at the time? Well, I think given that that expression was such a standard expression in the world in which Peter lived and then particularly Jesus' response to Peter as we see later on in verse 22.

We're on pretty safe ground, I think, to say that Peter lived and he served about another three decades after this occasion at the Sea of Galilee. Three more decades he lived with this prediction hanging, if you like, over him.

[17:51] And then John adds in verse 19, Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. So here's Peter. He imitates Christ in the kind of death that he suffers.

He imitates Christ, but of course to a lesser extent than in the case of Jesus in bringing glory to God by his death. Peter clearly learned through his following years of ministry as that gospel was proclaimed far and wide after the day of Pentecost that whenever a Christian follows Christ and follows Christ to suffering and death, it is a means of bringing praise to God.

And we see that clearly again in Peter's first letter. He's writing to suffering Christians that have been spread out, dispersed, Christians who are undergoing persecution. And in chapter 4 of 1 Peter, he writes this.

He says that Peter indeed was martyred, probably in Rome, under the Emperor Nero.

And back in John 15, Jesus had told the disciples in the upper room, in that upper room discourse, that the world would persecute them on account of the name of Jesus.

[19:34] Why? Jesus says, So I want to suggest then that Peter's death becomes a paradigm of how each of us should face suffering for the faith.

How should we face suffering for the faith? With resolute trust in Almighty God. Jesus says to Peter, follow me.

And in those two simple words, follow me, it reminds us, doesn't it, of the initial call of Jesus to the disciples. But in the light of what Peter's just been told, that expression, follow me, that instruction, has got a much deeper significance.

And those words, follow me, I'd suggest, have got really a profound theological significance. You think about the three years that Peter spent with Jesus teaching him.

And then this very specific teaching by the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. But the words, I guess, at one level are also simply an invitation.

[20:43] Jesus was saying, follow me. And they went off strolling along the shoreline of the sea. And as they were walking, John records in verse 20, Peter turned and he saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them.

He was the one who'd reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who is it that is going to betray you? I mean, it's significant, isn't it, that John is identified as the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper.

That's how he's identified. And that clearly establishes the intimacy that existed between John and Jesus. And that's not unimportant in this story given the strength of the proclamation that John makes in verse 24.

Well, Peter says to Jesus, Lord, what about him? And in that question we get a glimpse, don't we, of the rivalry that clearly existed between Peter and John.

Hinted at in the fishing expedition but certainly here much more clearly. And my paraphrase of Jesus' response is simply mind your own business.

[21 : 53] That's what Jesus says to him. Peter, mind your own business. When personal rivalries are everywhere in the world, I read this week in The Age that one of the sports writers said this.

He said, for a decade Wayne Carey and Glenn Jakovich stood shoulder to shoulder and created possibly the greatest personal rivalry of the modern era. Carey admitted he would always train a little harder during the week in a lead up to a match against the Eagles.

But there was much better reading even than that in the weekly press because the hot entertainment news of the past week has been the desperate histrionics at a photo shoot of the stars of the US TV show and it was a photo shoot for the magazine Vanity Fair.

Now, hopefully you haven't watched this show but the show could be classified in all sorts of ways but it's certainly a social satire and it features a group of ladies.

And at this photo shoot one abused the other one for trying to get in the middle of the photo shoot. Strong abuse. And then strategies had also previously been put in place to try and prevent the one trying to get in the middle of the photo shoot than the one who gets all of the publicity or the bulk of it.

[23 : 10] Strategies were put in place to make sure that she didn't get the first use of the wardrobe. Desperate housewives. Rivalries. I mean, they're everywhere in life. And often in rivalries they lead to some pretty nasty behaviour.

So what do we make then of Peter's question Lord, what about him? What about John? Well, the closeness of John to Jesus may have led Peter, in fact may have led the rest of the disciples to believe that Jesus was in fact favouring John.

I mean, John himself and certainly according to Matthew his mother seems to have encouraged this sort of view of favouritism. In Mark 10 we read James and John the sons of Zebedee they came forward to Jesus and said to him Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.

Jesus said to them what is it you want me to do for you? And they said to him grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory. And the other disciples were clearly pretty peeved about this because in verse 41 we read when the ten heard this they began to be angry with James and John.

And then Jesus goes on and he uses this incident this unseemly incident to teach them about the life of a servant. Jesus says whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all.

[24 : 35] For the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. I find it interesting that when Peter challenges Jesus because that's what he's doing about what's going to happen to his buddy John Jesus doesn't justify his different treatment of John.

Listen to these words of Jesus verse 22 If it is my will that he remain until I come what is that to you? So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die yet Jesus did not say to him that he wouldn't die but if it is my will that he remain until I come what is that to you?

You see the road of discipleship for Peter and John was different. For Peter it was a call to pastoral ministry and martyrdom and for John it was a long life and a strategic written witness.

Peter he needed a recommissioning he needed restoration John didn't. And so this issue if you like this rivalry between Peter and John I want to suggest has lessons for each of us.

The question is are we prepared to keep our eyes solely on the Lord? Are we prepared to fully trust his sovereign purposes in each of our lives?

[26 : 10] Peter of course had already had a pretty watery reminder hadn't he of taking his eyes off the Lord in Matthew 14. as he walked towards Jesus on the water?

Don't look at your circumstances don't look at other Christians don't look at others around you stay focused on the Lord. Jesus said to him what is that to you?

Follow me. I wonder if you struggle then with envy whether you struggle with what God is doing in someone else's life compared to your life what God is doing in someone else's ministry someone else's home group compared to yours I wonder if there's then rivalry amongst your Christian friends perhaps in your home group itself these particular verses have been really helpful to me in recent years as a family of course some of you are aware that we've gone through some deep struggles with our son Brendan's health and his near total lack of normal functions so at times when that road if you like has become very difficult I've been tempted numerous times more than I'd like to own up numerous times I've been tempted to look around and say wow they've actually got this pretty easy and every time without fail every time the Holy Spirit has reminded me of this encounter between the disciples and Jesus and it's a very convicting encounter isn't it it's a challenging encounter simply to stay focused on the Lord to stay focused on his sovereignty and on his grace so I guess as I was reflecting on this passage this week

I asked myself well have I learnt that lesson I think my answer would have to be I'm learning the lesson but I haven't arrived yet it is at its most basic level a question of trust do we trust the Lord in all of the aspects of our lives well John concludes the chapter and he concludes the gospel account the gospel of John with these final words this is the disciple who's testifying to these things and he's written them and we know that his testimony is true but there are also many other things that Jesus did if every one of them were written down I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written John's saying you can believe it I John was there I'm a true witness in fact John says I've witnessed such a vast number of things that Jesus did that if they were written down this is my paraphrase even

Paul Barker wouldn't be able to read all of those volumes and that's a big statement but why didn't John record more look back then at John 20 because in verse 31 John writes but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name you see friends we don't actually need any more these things have been written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name the passage raises lots of issues doesn't it lots of considerations lots of challenges in our life Peter of course must have felt like such a failure after those three denials disqualified from future service but the test that

[30 : 14] Jesus applies to him is one of Peter's love for him that is the relationship between the person and the chief shepherd is what matters it matters to the exclusion of the curiosity about the future of others perhaps that's relevant to you with failures in your life as you look at the way you've responded to the Lord in the past tonight's a good night to again think about your love for the chief shepherd and you might need to reassess your love for the Lord because love in scripture is expressed in obedience thirdly I guess tonight God may have been speaking to someone here who through his word you've come to realise that in fact you're not in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and if that's the case for you then the call tonight is follow me but of course that's actually the call for each one of us continue to follow me

Jesus would say and fourthly I guess the passage raises issues about rivalry about envy about the seeds of bitterness that can grow up and there might be all sorts of reasons that's given rise to that in your life as you look around my strong encouragement if that's the case then bring that issue to the cross what do I mean by that bring it back to the Lord and confess it ask the Lord for forgiveness and then as in repentance as in turning around then continue on your life with your mind's eyes focused on the Lord I want to suggest that we just spend a few moments quietly reflecting on the passage reflecting on what the Holy Spirit I'm sure has spoken to each one of us tonight before we sing our next song as an act of prayer to the Lord prayer.