

Do You Love Me? - 2nd May 2021

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[0 : 00] Hey everyone, good to be with you for this, our latest Sunday session. My name's Matt, the Vigorous St John's, and it's a bank holiday weekend, which may not feel that different for some, I know, but for others, a long weekend is a welcome bonus. Indeed, we're now in the month of May, a month where there's the hope of a further unlocking of restrictions, and along with all those over 40 now being offered the vaccine, there's relief that we're making progress on those fronts, at least. It's a long weekend for younger ones too, though, and Lottie's back with another Sunday Stars session. This week, zooming in on Zacchaeus and thinking about acceptance and encouragement, so if you're smaller than even Zacchaeus was, do check that out at your leisure.

Indeed, God, whether we're young, old, or somewhere in the middle, or as we were saying last week, whether we're somewhat languishing or maybe limbering up for the month ahead, thank you for your understanding, your provision, your encouragement of us. Keep building our social fitness levels back up, please, helping us to know how and when to ease back into engaging and meeting up with others. We know there's a lot of repairing that needs to take place in all sorts of ways, so thank you that you are the healer who we can trust to lead us through. Work on us, please, in increasing our confidence and reducing our anxieties. At the same time, we know there are millions of us still waiting for even a first dose of the vaccine, so keep us mindful of the needs and situations of our neighbours, our friends, that we might be gracious, thoughtful, generous and patient with one another.

We're grateful for this chance now, though, to chew the fat with you, to take stock of where we're at and hopefully tune into your voice in our lives. So speak to us now, we pray. Thank you, God. Amen.

All right, all set and we're off because this week we're going to continue delving into the stories of Jesus in this post-Easter, pre-Pentecost time of year, continuing where we left off last week with the disciples having breakfast on a beach with the risen Jesus. If you recall, Jesus had helped a bunch of his disciples land a massive catch of fish from the Sea of Galilee. Now, to help us get our bearings as to where this happened, here's the mainland area of Israel where the gospel stories take place.

That little bit of blue down the bottom in the south is the top of the Dead Sea, with Jerusalem and Jericho nearby. You've got the Jordan River dissecting the country north to south, hence terms like the west bank these days, which is the area on the west bank, the left-hand side here of the Jordan River.

[3 : 15] And then in the north, you've got this big freshwater lake known as the Sea of Galilee. Galilee being the region where we've seen such tragic events this week with the crush which has killed dozens of people at a religious festival in the area.

And yeah, as I say, it's the region of the Sea of Galilee, a lake fed by various springs and rivers, and one which in biblical times supported a huge fishing economy, an industry which continues on a smaller scale to this day. Indeed, fishing was such a big deal in Jesus' time that historians are aware of at least 16 harbours on the Sea of Galilee from the time of the first century. Some of these harbours are in towns and villages where Jesus spent time himself and which we've mentioned on here before.

Places like Bethsaida, Capernaum, Magdala, all on that north-west edge of the lake. Now, you'll notice though, there's another little village and harbour on this same stretch of shore called Tabga, the place where it's reckoned that this episode with Jesus and the fish-catching breakfast-eating disciples took place. How do we know this? Well, we know from the writings of a woman called Egeria, a pilgrim in the 4th century, that there was already a small chapel commemorating this event in Tabga, which means that the tradition of association with this place was a very early one.

And the earlier a tradition is established, the more likely it is to be true, so we can be pretty sure that it was indeed on this stretch of shore that this breakfast with Jesus took place.

Indeed, the name Tabga comes from a Greek term meaning seven springs, warm springs which exist to this day and maybe explain why shoals of fish gathered so close to the shore, a shoal which the disciples were able to catch at Jesus' direction. Now, we'll think more about Tabga in a bit, but as we saw last week, for these fishermen like Peter, having Jesus back directing and enabling them to land a catch of fish was a huge source of comfort and inspiration for them. And so, let's pick up the story in John's Gospel after the risen Jesus has fed his disciples with some fish and bread.

[5 : 51] When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?

Yes, Lord, he said. You know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my lambs. Again, Jesus said, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He answered, yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Jesus said, feed my sheep.

Now, this conversation between Jesus and Peter is a significant one for all sorts of reasons, not least because the three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him serve as a way for Peter to overcome any guilt which he's still carrying about denying Jesus three times on the night before his crucifixion.

Indeed, the lingering smell of a charcoal fire on the beach mirrors the smell of the charcoal fire, which Peter warmed himself around in the high priest's courtyard on that fateful night.

[7 : 24] And so there's something cathartic going on here for Peter, a resetting for him. And so Jesus asks him, do you truly love me more than these?

It's a curious kind of question, though, since it's unclear whether Jesus means, do you love me more than these other disciples love me?

Or whether he's asking Peter, do you love me more than you love these others, more than you love your friends? And yet I wonder if it's maybe left deliberately vague because there's value to be found in each interpretation.

For example, at the Last Supper, Peter is recorded as saying to Jesus in a somewhat cocky way, Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.

Sadly, we know Peter did fall away pretty soon after that. Drastically so by denying he even knew Jesus. And so maybe Jesus is seeing if Peter still carries this somewhat unjustified sense of superiority.

[8 : 36] Do you love me more than these? And yet because Peter answers, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. I'm not convinced it can be Jesus asking Peter to compare his love for Jesus with the love the others have for him.

Because if so, Peter is still saying yes to that question. And that just seems inappropriately arrogant of Peter, given all that he's been through.

And so my hunch is that Jesus is instead asking Peter, Do you love me more than you love your friends? More than you love even your brother Andrew?

Now on one level, even this might feel a bit of a strange, you know, almost playground question.

You know, are we BFFs or what? You know, are we best friends forever, Peter?

And yet on a deeper level, it's a question which echoes a teaching Jesus gives. One that's found in this passage from Matthew's Gospel when he says this.

[9 : 40] Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. I think it's fair to say it's one of Jesus's more challenging teachings.

A teaching which states that Jesus must come before our family, our friends in terms of our allegiance and love. Indeed, I'd suggest this kind of teaching is particularly challenging in a culture like ours, where a family-first principle dominates to such a degree that the success or security or even time spent with our family can easily become something which takes precedence over loving Jesus and serving his priorities.

Now, for me personally, I'm totally happy to say that I love Jesus more than I love my wife, my children, my parents and so on, because I do.

And I'm happy for them to know that because I trust God that if I love Jesus as my utmost, then he will enable me to love my family and friends in far deeper ways than I could do if he wasn't my priority.

I don't always get it right. Indeed, it's a constant judgment on my part to know how to balance the need to love my family alongside the call to love my neighbor as myself.

[11:06] You know, whether that's with time, money, energy or whatever. But the saying of Jesus, which holds me steady, is this promise of his. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

God first, Jesus first, and everything else will slot into its rightful place. Maybe that's a challenge God might be asking you to face today.

But if it is by way of encouragement, I know that as for me and my house, in trying to love Jesus first, God certainly hasn't let me down so far.

Indeed, just the opposite. And so that's what I'd say Jesus is indeed asking Peter. Do you love me more than you love these?

Am I your number one, the one you love with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? In fact, I suggest the truth of that question is underlined when we hear Jesus' response to Peter's reply.

[12:18] Yes, Lord, you know that I love you, says Peter. And Jesus replies, feed my lambs. You see, in acknowledging that yes, he did love Jesus first and foremost, Jesus then knows that Peter is ready to be able to lead others.

Feed my lambs, he says. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep. Three commissions from Jesus for Peter to be a shepherd, for Peter to feed and tend Jesus' flock, his people, his disciples.

Now, we'll come on to what that shepherding might entail in a moment, but hold fire for a minute because it's worth noting the metaphor which Jesus is using here because I think if we're honest, it kind of comes out of nowhere, really.

I mean, think about it. Jesus has come to this fishing village of Tabgah to visit these fishermen friends of his while they're fishing before telling them to cast their nets again in order to land a bumper catch of fish.

He then proceeds to tell them to bring some of the fish they've caught and join him for the fish breakfast he's already been cooking. So, it's fair to say there's a bit of a fishing theme going on here.

[13:47] And yet what's curious is that in commissioning Peter for this next stage of his life and ministry, Jesus doesn't tell Peter the fisherman to go out and fish for more people in order to bring them into his kingdom.

No. Instead, Jesus tells Peter to be their shepherd, to feed and tend and take care of people in a way a shepherd would do for their sheep.

And yet, being a shepherd, staying up to protect the flock from predators, roaming the wilderness to find them pasture, leading sheep who know the sound of the shepherd's voice and so on, well, it's a very different role to being a fisherman with nets and boats and water and so on.

Peter, it seems, is trained in one role, but he's an absolute novice in the other. And so, why does Jesus call him now to be a shepherd?

What's going on here? Well, it seems to me Jesus now feels that Peter is ready to progress from being a fisher of people to being a shepherd for them.

[14:59] It's a role change, a new calling, a new era, in which Peter is not just a responsibility to tell people about Jesus, but to nurture them in that faith, to guide them, to nourish them, to train them, to disciple them.

You see, Jesus has already been demonstrating to Peter and the other disciples what being a shepherd, in this sense, is all about. Indeed, in John chapter 10, Jesus reveals himself as the one who is the shepherd of the sheep, saying, I am the good shepherd.

I know my sheep and my sheep know me, just as my father knows me and I know the father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. Now, remarkably, Jesus is now saying to Peter, OK, I've been your shepherd and you've been my sheep, but now it's time for you to become a shepherd too, to shepherd other sheep in my name.

But why is now the right time for Peter to take on this role? Well, it seems that Peter has finally been able to process his own pain, his own mistakes, his own past, his own experience, if you like, of the ups and downs of life and faith.

And that processing means that he's now in a position to be able to share that experience and learning with others in order to help them on their journey.

[16 : 34] Just as a shepherd needs to anticipate any pitfalls and understand the mindset of their sheep, so too Peter is now ready to empathise with others in their own confusion, their own flaws, their own hopes, and lead them onto safer, greener pastures.

Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep, says Jesus. I guess it's this idea of a wounded healer, in that our own experience of pain, of doubt, of grace, can actually make us far more effective in helping others on their own journey.

Yes, it takes honesty, vulnerability, and I'd suggest a real absence of ego to be able to help others along their way. But I know I respond far better to people's guidance and advice when they're prepared to be open with me than I ever am to those who come across as untouchably strong or too good to be true.

Now, it seems Peter's now ready for this new calling, a calling which interestingly ties in with this stage of the resurrected Jesus's life too, since he is also now a wounded healer.

The one who, as we were saying the other week, bears the scars of his experience, his pain, his suffering. It's as if he says to Peter, look, let me use your scars too.

[18 : 12] Scars and experience which will enable Peter to be a hugely effective shepherd of others. Now, what's also worth noting is that Jesus isn't going to just leave Peter to it.

No, not at all. Indeed, far from being a one man and his dog, as we might picture shepherding in this country, in Jesus' time, shepherding was very much a shared activity.

You see, we know that for every 50 sheep a shepherd had, they would have an under-shepherd, an assistant who would lead the sheep, yeah, but always be under the authority of the chief shepherd. That's why in the parable of the lost sheep, the chief shepherd could leave the other 99 sheep in the care of his under-shepherds and go out searching for that one lost sheep.

It wasn't risky or neglectful for the rest of the flock because they were still being looked after.

Rather, the parable was a picture of the tireless care of the chief shepherd to bring those who may have strayed back into the fold.

[19 : 21] Equally, that's why the feeding of the 5,000, we're told in Mark's Gospel that Jesus told the people to sit in groups of 50 and 100 on the green grass.

It's all a shepherding analogy of a chief shepherd directing and feeding his sheep. And so, knowing this under-shepherd slash chief shepherd relationship, I think for me it helps to make sense of this passage from one of Peter's own letters as he explains in later life his understanding of what it means to be a shepherd of the sheep.

He says this, To the elders among you, be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them. Not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. Not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve. Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

You see, I think Peter knew that his calling to be an under-shepherd was one rooted in humility, honesty, service and vulnerability.

[20 : 43] It was a calling which was enriched, not despite of, but because of his own flaws and failures which had been recognised but redeemed by Jesus.

And above all, Peter knew that whatever shepherding he was able to offer, well, it was all under the guidance and love of Jesus, the good chief shepherd who has ultimate care of all the flock.

And so with all these kind of pictures and ideas in mind, I think I'd suggest that this probably raises a key question for us, which we do well to ponder over the coming weeks and months.

And here's the question. What new calling, what new roles might the resurrected Jesus, the chief shepherd, be calling each of us into as lockdown continues to lift?

You know, as is widely accepted, this whole pandemic will have changed us all. Some changes for the better, some changes which are still all too raw for us and need God's healing to help scar up, you know, to be redeemed, if you like.

[21 : 58] But since we have been changed, it stands to reason that God might have new roles, new tasks, new opportunities for us, new ways to serve, which we're only now equipped and called to do.

You know, what of our experience over this past year and more? Experience of loneliness, isolation, anxiety, depression maybe, experience of money worries, of job insecurity, of tensions at home, but equally experiences of God's provision and how community life is key to our well-being.

You know, in light of all that experience, I wonder, might Jesus now be quietly saying to you, look, do you love me above everything and everyone else?

Because if you do, let me use you and your experiences, both good and bad, to help feed and take care of others.

The good news is that we don't have to be perfect to be able to shepherd others. I mean, bloomin' heck, Peter was anything but perfect.

[23 : 13] But, he loved Jesus and was willing for his experiences, warts and all, to be used by Jesus in helping to feed and take care of others.

What new calling might Jesus be giving to you? And that's a question we're going to be returning to over the coming weeks as we hopefully gear up as a church here at St John's for the new season which lies ahead.

Indeed, I'll finish with a little story of my own, a story which takes place on that same beach in Tabga, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Now, I've been fortunate enough to visit and lead groups on trips to Israel and Palestine a number of times over the years.

But the first time I visited Tabga was some 13 years ago. And I've got to say, both that first time and every time I've been back since, I've found it to be a very special place.

I mean, here's a crude little clip I took of the seashore back in 2008. It was so peaceful. And the kind of place you could really imagine as the location for that breakfast conversation between Peter and Jesus.

[24 : 31] Anyway, although I was part of a tourist group at the time, I managed, as the video shows, to take myself off from that group just for a few minutes. Just really, me and God on this beach.

Now, at the stage of my life I was at back in 2008, I was really wrestling with whether or not to put myself forward for ordination, you know, to be trained to be a vicar.

As in so many ways it wasn't, and to be honest, in many ways still isn't something that's appealing or, more to the point, something I felt able to do.

And so as I stood on that beach, I had one of those kind of prayerful brain splurts with God, you know, when there's not much time, but I just kind of said, oh come on God, you're going to have to show me what to do here.

I'm not sure I want to be a vicar, I'm not sure I can do this whole vicar thing. But then, in that very peaceful place, as clear as anything I've ever experienced, I heard a voice in my head saying, Matt, do you love me?

[25 : 44] And I kind of joked a bit and thought, oh blimey, I know what's coming. So I just said with my own words, kind of in a small way, echoing Peter, yes Lord, you know that I love you.

And almost as soon as I said it, I knew. Now to be honest, I can't even remember if that voice in my head said anything else like feed my sheep or whatever because I just knew.

I had this overwhelming sense from God that it'd be alright, that he'd got me, that he'd provide what I needed in this vicar stuff. And again, in my own small way, I knew that he was calling me to play my part in helping to feed and care for others.

Now, I've wobbled and ranted and made numerous mistakes in the role over the years since and I'm sure I will continue to do just that.

But for me, at least, this place in Tabga is special to me because it reminds me of a time when I sensed God affirming a new calling, a new direction for my life.

[26 : 55] A direction rooted not in my own ability, you know, far from it, but rather one rooted in the knowledge that I love Jesus and I was willing to let him lead and equip me.

And so, here I am, some 13 years later, still on that same fumbling, but for me at least, fulfilling journey. As for you, well, I don't know what kind of calling God's got for you for the months and years ahead, but I do know that God calls each of us to play our own part in helping to feed, tend, care for, in helping to shepherd others, using our own experience of faith to enrich and encourage others in theirs.

And just as it did for me, just as it did for Peter, I'd say it all stems from our response to Jesus' question, do you love me?

The rest will follow, but that, to me, sounds like a pretty good place to start. All right, well, with all that we've looked at in mind, let's listen to a track which the St John's band have recorded for us this week.

