

## Two Loves

The Gospel today is Chapter 21 of John's account. It is like no other part of John's Gospel and is thought to have been added later. But it has a very strange surreal feel about it with the unrecognised stranger on the shore, the near nakedness of Peter, the haul of 153 big fish, the barbecue of the beach, and so on. But what I would like to focus on is the exchange between Jesus and Peter.

Jesus takes Peter apart from the other disciples and he asks him three times "Peter, do you love me?" And three times Peter replies "Yes, Lord, I love you". The commentators tell us that this threefold expression of Peter's love cancels out his threefold denial when Jesus was arrested and the cock crowed twice. However, I believe there is more to this dialogue.

In the Greek original two different words are used for 'love'. Jesus uses one and Peter the other which suggests, to me anyway, that the way Jesus understands love is different from Peter's understanding and, if Peter is to love in the way Jesus loves, something has to change, he still has something to learn about what love really is.

I hope this doesn't sound too technical, but the two different words for love used here are *agapein* and *philein*. In most translations they are both translated by the English verb 'love', but there is something more subtle at work here. *Agapein* is the kind of love you have for your husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter. *Philein* is the love you have for a dear friend, and they are different. The first could be translated, in the first person, as 'I love you' whereas the second would be more like 'I'm fond of you'. There is a difference which puts a different complexion on the dialogue between Jesus and Peter which, if we translate it exactly would go something like this:

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?"

"Yes Lord, you know I'm fond of you"

"Feed my lambs"

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know I'm fond of you."

"Look after my sheep."

"Simon, son of John, are you fond of me?"

"Lord, you know everything; you know I'm fond of you."

"Feed my sheep."

Now whenever Jesus speaks of love or of the love of God, he always uses the agape word. Most notably, when he says to his disciples “you must love one another just as I have loved you” he uses agapein both times. In other words, he wants his followers to have exactly the same strong kind of love as he has, which is agapein not just philein, passionate, all-consuming love, not just friendship. What does this agape-love look like? Jesus says “someone can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends”. Jesus’ agape-love was the love that meant he was prepared to die for those he loved.

In this exchange, Jesus is asking Peter “do you love me enough to give your life for me?” And all Peter can manage is “Well, you know I’m fond of you”. This happens twice until the third time Jesus realises that Peter does not yet have the kind of self-sacrificing love that will be necessary if he is to lead the Church and ‘feed the sheep’. But in the next rather ominous line, Jesus tells Peter that he is not yet mature enough to do this, but the time will come when he will allow someone to lead him where he would not want to go and then his love will be of the agape kind and he will lay down his life for Jesus and his Church when he is martyred for his faith. Then Peter will be able to say “Lord, now you know I love you” using the verb agapein.

This weekend we celebrate the feast of the English Martyrs, the Forty Martyrs as they are sometimes known. I was privileged to be in Rome in 1970 and to be present at their canonisation by Pope Paul VI. Forty four of the students who studied at my seminary in Rome were put to death for their faith in the 16th and 17th centuries and eighteen of them were proclaimed saints on that day. This prompted Cardinal Hume on a visit to our college on Martyrs’ Day some years later to ask himself whether today’s English College students would be prepared to be martyred for their faith and, looking round at his youthful, eager congregation, he said he thought we would. I have to say that while I was flattered by his confidence, I wasn’t so sure in my own case. Cardinal Hume’s question was the same as that asked by Jesus of Peter and even today I have to ask myself, am I just very fond of Jesus, am I just his very good friend, or do I really love him so that I would be prepared to die for him, or for my faith, or for his followers - or for my parishioners? I rather hope I’ll never be in a position where I have to find out.