

Awkward Questions

John 21.1-19

I want to look at the first part of that story of the interview between Jesus and Peter that we have just heard about. It was what we might call in modern terms a 'sticky' interview. Jesus starts it off by saying "Simon, son of John." In other words, he goes back beyond the name that he had given Simon – Peter, the Rock - to the name that Simon had had when he first met Jesus. What you call someone tells you a lot about the mood of the occasion. If you are called by your Christian name, or some nickname, it says one thing. If you are called Mr. So and So, or even worse, just by your surname, it says something else. Parents do it with their children. A little boy normally known as Chris, may well get addressed as Christopher James Shufflebottom, if he is in trouble. The words as well as the tone of voice say something. So here Jesus goes back to the old name Simon. It is important. And then he asks him, in various ways whether he loves him. For biblical scholars there is a big problem of translation and interpretation here. The problem lies in the fact that Greek has four words for love, and two of them are used here. The strong word for Christian love - the love of God for man, is *agape*, and the less strong word, for brotherly love and affection is *philia*. So here we have a sequence which runs like this. Jesus says: Do you *agape* me? Simon says Yes, I *philia* you. Jesus says: Do you *agape* me, Simon replies, I *philia* you. Then Jesus says. Do you *philia* me? And Simon says Yes, I do. I *philia* you. The problem is whether or not John meant there to be any distinction between the words. At one time everyone thought he did. Then people began to argue that he didn't - it was only for variety in style. Now we have a group which supports both points of view. For what it is worth, I think the distinction was intentional, and I side with them. But we can't know for certain I suppose. But let me assume that it was deliberate that there were two words. How does this help us understand what was going on? As we talk, let me use the word *love* to stand for the strong word *agape*, and let me use the expression '*care for*' to stand for the weaker word *philia*.

So Jesus begins by asking Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these – by which we can presume that he meant the other disciples. There was a time when Peter would have unhesitatingly said "Yes". He once said that he wouldn't desert Jesus even if the other did, you remember. He thought of himself as the strong one But after the denials which he had made whilst Jesus was under arrest, he had been knocked down from this superior position. He doesn't make the firm unhesitating reply - instead he says "Yes, Lord, you know that I care for you." He can't bring himself even to use the word for Christian love which implies committent and loyalty. So he uses this other word which is less demanding, less exclusive. It seems on the face of it a very half hearted reply. But nonetheless, he is given the job "Feed my lambs". That says a lot to me about the level at which God can use me. Jesus doesn't necessarily demand total commitment before he can use us. What he does want is our truthfulness about our

relationship with him. He wants us to realise our dependence on him, rather than thinking we can be self-reliant. Simon is made a disciple, and now made an apostle whilst still feeling very much the sinner. But Jesus asks the question again. But this time he doesn't ask whether he loves him more than the others. It is as if he is saying; "Alright, I know now that you don't want to claim any superior love and loyalty. So forget about comparing yourself with the others. What about just you and me. Do you love me?" And again Simon is left faced with his conscience. He does love Jesus. He can't deny it. But his love is so weak, and has been so easily swayed, he finds that he can't affirm it either. So again he has to reply with less than a full answer, and says again? "Yes, Lord, you know that I care for you."

Then comes the third question, which apparently upset Simon most of all. Jesus says "Simon, do you care for me?" This is perhaps one good reason to suppose that the use of two words was deliberate. So it is as if Jesus is saying "Simon, do you really care for me. Can you be sure of even that?" And poor old Simon is turned in on himself to face this most demanding and rigorous question. And this time he can't even say "Yes" - he simply says to Jesus – "Lord, you know everything." So what he relies on is not his own love, but Jesus' knowledge and love for him. What a change from the Peter of before the arrest. We might say that he is broken. But is precisely it that moment of being broken that he is remade - that he is told that is his job to feed the sheep, to share the work of Jesus the Good Shepherd. People sometimes feel worried by the way in which Jesus seems to demand that we face the fact we are nothing, that in the words of the old collect "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves." But it is true that unless we do face that, we will never be in a position to receive the illimitable strength that God offers. Paul was to put it very powerfully to the Corinthians - "My power comes to its full strength in weakness". So in a sense it should be easy. It is not people who are weak who have the problems - it is those who think they are strong - who think they can do it all, who have the abilities, the moral fibre, or whatever. Jesus faced a man like that - a tough guy like Peter obviously was - and by probing and probing on what he really meant by saying he "loved" - he reduced him to nothing - and THEN, he was able to commission him to do the biggest and most responsible job of all.

Facing up to questions that might make us feel bad about ourselves is never a pleasant process. I think Peter must have hated Jesus for putting him through this interview. We may hate it when we are made to face up to ourselves - and what does our love and loyalty to God really mean. But that resentment can and will turn to thanks when we realise that facing truth involves facing truth about ourselves as well as the truth about God - and that if it is God we are dealing with, he is not trying to put us down, to humiliate us in some destructive way - it is all part of his love for us, his desire that we can become all that we could become. We can feel sorry for Peter as we hear this story. We probably would have been less demanding than Jesus was, but then we would have been letting Peter off the hook. Peter had to look at himself in the same way as he had looked at Jesus. When Jesus asked "Who am I?" Peter had been able to say "You are the Christ". Now Jesus says "Who are you, Peter?" And that is far and away more difficult to answer for Peter. But if Peter's faith was, and if your faith is a matter of a relationship - then we need to know both

the person loved and the person doing the loving - to know who Jesus is, and who we are. Then we are in a position to bring the two together, and for that relationship to deepen and be useful.

I think having been sorry for Peter (which probably means being sorry for ourselves) we can then go on to be happy for him, and happy for ourselves. Here is the man broken, and in the depths. Yet is precisely then that he is given his commission, that he can be of use. He has three times denied that Jesus matters to him. Now three times he has said, without over statement, without flannel, just what Jesus does mean to him. And he is accepted, on those terms. The story ends just as the first encounter with Jesus had - with the command "Follow me". That is all Jesus had ever wanted - that Peter should follow, just as he was, without bluster, pretence. That is all he asks of us. To come after him as we are, with all our weaknesses, our doubts, our confusions and sinfulness. It wasn't for Peter a question of "Sort yourself out, and then follow me" Nor is it for us. Just follow me - you will do. Thank God for that.