



Sunday 10th April, 2016 – Easter 3

The Rev'd Jane Horton

If I handed out blank sheets of paper and pencils to everybody here this morning, including myself and then asked us all to take a few minutes to think back over our lives and write down a figure on that paper, representing the number of regrets we have – I wonder what number each of us would come up with.

Of course, we might have an internal argument within ourselves about the relative seriousness of those regrets. Some of us might even be tempted to do a defiant Edith Piaf and scrawl, “Non! Je ne regrette rien!” But if we were being really honest with ourselves, I would be very surprised if very many of us could actually bring ourselves to write the number 0.

Guilt. Regret. For many of us, past failures can haunt and even cripple our lives.

Our reading this morning from John's Gospel describes another of Jesus' post-resurrection encounters with his disciples. As ever with John, it's full of theological detail and can be explored from many different angles. But today I want to focus especially on what it might have to say to us about Jesus' relationship with Peter. And through that lens, to focus on what it might have to say to us about God's relationship with each one of us.

Brave, bold, impetuous Peter, full of big ideas and extrovert leadership qualities. I'm sure he must have exasperated some of the quieter, more reflective introverts and dreamers on Jesus' team. And of course, he makes plenty of mistakes. Peter's the one who initially refuses to 'get with the programme' at the Last Supper, resists Jesus' attempts to wash his feet, then changes his mind and wants a full body wash. He's the one who insists that he will never betray Jesus, will even follow him to death, takes a swashbuckling swipe at the High Priest's servant with his sword at Gethsemane. He even follows Jesus and his captors as far as the High Priest's house and then into the courtyard.

And then Peter does exactly what he has promised never to do. He betrays Jesus. He's feeling frightened, threatened, desperate to save his own skin. And he denies knowing Jesus, not once, not even twice, but three times.

Have you had times in your life when you've felt that you've let other people down, let yourself down, let God down? I have.

For me, it's happened more than once, to greater or lesser degrees. But perhaps most profoundly in the breakdown of my marriage. I think one of the things I found hardest to come to terms with was the sense that not only had the relationship with my husband broken down, but that also our family, our home had been torn apart. And even though I knew it was not all my fault, for a long time I felt a tremendous sense of guilt and regret for the pain that that caused to my sons, then aged 20 and 18.

How do we come back from that kind of life-shattering event? How do we come back from the mistakes we've made, the things we've done wrong, or have failed to do right? Is there a way back from letting ourselves and others down? From letting God down?

I love this morning's reading from John 21 and I think it can give us a lot of hope.

Even though the disciples have already encountered Jesus since his resurrection – and some of them on more than one occasion - they still don't recognize him when he stands there on the beach in the early morning. Maybe it's partly the early morning light, perhaps it's still a bit misty, they're probably tired. They've been up fishing all night after all – fruitlessly, since they've caught absolutely nothing. Perhaps there's something here for us about the futility of trying to put the clock back, about trying to pick up the threads of how things were before, about harking back to 'the good old days', being afraid to embrace the fact that the world or situation around us has changed and we're living in a new reality.

Anyway, the apparent stranger on the shore calls out to Peter and the other disciples to cast their net on the right side of the boat and suddenly they are overwhelmed with fish! It's at this point that John says he thinks it's Jesus! I wonder if the disciples' minds went back to that earlier occasion recorded in Luke's Gospel, when after another useless night's fishing, Jesus had told Peter and Andrew to 'put out into the deep'. That morning, they and James and John had returned with more than enough fish to fill two boats and a new vocation to go fishing for people.

How do you come back from failure? Failing people, especially those you love. Failing to do what you've been called to do. Failing to do what you've **said** you'd do. Failing to keep the promises you've made, the vows you've taken.

Peter's about to find out.

'Come and have breakfast', says Jesus, when they've all reached the shore – in his eagerness to be the first to greet Jesus, Peter's got rather wetter than the others. There's a small charcoal fire burning. Even the smell of it must have reminded Peter of the fire burning in the High Priest's courtyard the night of Jesus' arrest, the night that he'd denied him. I wonder if he got that kind of hollow feeling in his stomach that I sometimes have, when things remind me of past failures, of things I'm ashamed of. All kinds of things can trigger painful memories for us.

The invitation to a meal is typical of Jesus. Perhaps Peter remembers the bread and fish that the little boy brought for his picnic that day on the mountainside; and how after Jesus had blessed it, he and the other disciples helped give it out to everybody; and somehow, **somehow**, in a wonderful display of God's generosity, there was enough for more than five thousand hungry people to eat their fill and still have plenty of leftovers.

Breakfast is over and Jesus beckons to Peter to join him and they begin to walk slowly along the shoreline together.

And then those deeply searching questions, addressing Peter by his proper name: "Simon, son of John, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?"

The first and second times, Peter's "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you", elicits a fresh commission from Jesus: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep". But Jesus asks **three** times, mirroring the three times that Peter denied Jesus. That's pretty painful. By the third time, Peter's really feeling it, and you can

almost feel the desperation in his voice when he says, “Lord, you know **everything**; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep”, says Jesus, and then a moment or two later, “Follow me”.

This exchange between Jesus and Peter is one that speaks to me at a very deep level. The shepherd imagery and call to feed and care for Christ’s flock has always been at the centre of my sense of vocation to ordained ministry.

But in the light of my own past failures, there are other aspects of this exchange that I find deeply moving too: through these hard questions, Jesus is helping Peter to really search his heart with honesty and confront his past failure. Yet at the same time Jesus is recommissioning Peter, not once, not twice, but three times over. He is restoring Peter, giving him a way back, a fresh start, showing him that though what has happened can never be undone and will always be a part of Peter’s history, Jesus still loves him unconditionally, still values and trusts him, still has work for him to do.

I said earlier that for many of us, past failures can haunt and even cripple our lives. But that’s not what God wants for us. In God’s love and mercy, I believe we **can** have a fresh start, our mistakes and failures **can** be forgiven and somehow redeemed. *Just think about what happened to Saul after he fell off his horse in our reading from Acts earlier!*

In my own life, a part of God’s fresh start in the broadest sense has been of ongoing forgiveness and healing, a gradual coming to terms with the past and acceptance of my failures, and the experience of a renewed call to serve Him through ordained ministry and the joy that has come from that.

I wonder what it might mean for you?