

DO YOU LOVE ME?

John 21:1-17

We are still in Easter time and so we're focusing on the appearances of the risen Christ over the 40 days from His resurrection to His ascension.

This morning we look at His appearance to the disciples in Galilee.

It's one of my favourite passages because it has such a nice setting – a fish braai on the beach.

I don't know if any of you have been to the Sea of Galilee – it is one of the most beautiful places in the world – and when you're there you have a deep sense of biblical times – this is where Jesus spent a lot of time.

On the day of resurrection, the angel had promised that Jesus would meet His disciples in Galilee – and here the promise is fulfilled.

We're told that at least seven disciples were there – they had been fishing all night without success – until Jesus came.

He provided everything – as He always does when we have need.

He told the disciples where to catch fish – he prepared a fire to cook the fish on – and from somewhere he sourced some bread.

After breakfast Jesus focused the conversation on one thing – we're not sure if it was in the group or whether Jesus drew Peter aside – but He directs His words to Peter.

There has been much speculation around what Jesus meant when He asked Peter – “Do you love me more than these?”

What was the “these” that Jesus was referring to – it's not clear in the text – but let me make three suggestions this morning.

He could have meant, “Do you love me more than your fellow disciples do?”

We remember that just before Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane – Peter had boasted that his loyalty to Jesus was greater than any of the other disciples.

After the meal in the upper room – they went to the Mount of Olives – and Jesus said to the group (Matthew 26:31):

“This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

And Peter responded first as he usually did (Matthew 26:33):

“Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”

Perhaps Peter didn’t mean to boast but just assure Jesus of his loyalty – however it didn’t come across that way.

It came across as Peter letting the others know that even though their faith may be weak – he would never fail to trust his Master completely and serve Him without compromise or disloyalty.

Well, we know how that went – and so it could very well be why Jesus asked Peter the question – “Do you love me more than these?”

This question also comes to us today.

How strong is your love for Jesus when compared or contrasted with the love of other Christians?

As we contemplate this let me say immediately that we are not in competition with other Christians as to who is the best servant of Jesus.

I’ve said before – such an attitude is entirely unchristian if it causes one to develop a critical spirit towards others and to think of yourself more highly than you ought.

It is worth asking the question though – but let me ask it in a different way.

Are you only a lukewarm Christian – or are you known as one whose loyalty to Jesus is far above the minimal standard?

Are you radically in love with Jesus?

It's been said that there are two groups in every church.

There are those who merely belong – they might be saved but they are not showing by their fruits any evidence of a deep love for Jesus – they hang on for the ride but cannot be depended on to witness or serve in any effective way – they are simply consumers.

The other group is the inner circle – the nucleus – that bears the load of ministry – and so conveys their love for Jesus.

Which group are you in?

Perhaps Jesus meant – “Do you love me more than you love other people?”

There were six others in the group that morning – perhaps Jesus wanted Peter to compare his love for Jesus with his love for his friends.

Peter was a man of influence – in other words – others followed him.

We see it when he said to his friends – “I’m going fishing” – and they responded – “We’ll go with you”.

Peter enjoyed his leadership of the group – and it seemed that they had again become disillusioned – they had not seen Jesus since His appearing in the upper room in Jerusalem where He revealed Himself to them in a very expressive way – particularly to Thomas.

But as time went on and Jesus was nowhere to be seen - they probably asked themselves – “Was it all real, or was it some sort of dream we had?”

Peter's decision to go fishing was more than just getting away for a few hours – it was not a social pastime – it was an indication that he was ready to return to his old life – to go back to the way things were before Jesus showed up.

But then Jesus came and showed Peter again His divine person and that He wanted Peter to be part of His redemptive plan – but Peter needed to love Jesus more than he loved his friends – even if they deserted Peter – he must be determined to follow Jesus.

It's reminiscent of the time Jesus said (Luke 14:26):

“If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life.

Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple.”

This again raises some questions for us.

What do you love the most – the applause of the crowd or the approval of the Saviour?

Will peer pressure cause you to compromise your faith – and it's not just a teenage thing?

Is there a line you're not willing to cross in your dedication to Christ?

In this question that Jesus asks – He is saying to Peter and to us – that our love for Him must come before our love for anyone else – we must never allow another person to come between us and our Saviour – this is radical dedication.

The last suggestion is that perhaps Jesus was asking – “Do you love me more than these ‘things’ that are around you?”

Jesus could have been pointing to the fishing nets and other equipment used in the trade – in other words, Peter’s old life.

You see friends – once you’ve accepted the Lord as your Saviour and have committed yourself to following Him as His disciple – you cannot go back to the way things were before – to your old way of life as Paul says, “You become a new creation.”

Jesus put it like this (Luke 9:62):

“Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”

It’s a matter of personal priorities – the issue of things and making a living always confronts us.

Now – let’s be clear – nowhere does the Word of God condemn the striving to earn the necessities of life for oneself and one’s family.

Only when this labour gets out of hand and becomes top priority is there a problem – Paul said (1Timothy 5:8):

“...whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

However – the Bible does warn about majoring on the material things of life.

One of the greatest spiritual needs within the church today is – as someone put it – “to defy the tyranny of the tangible”.

We’ve spoken about this before – but we must constantly hold it before us – because the power of things is such an enslaving power.

It calls us to consider – What are the ‘real things’ in life? What’s worth pursuing?

Is it those things that can be seen and handle?

I would suggest 'no' – because those things can fade away in a moment.

What lasts for ever are the spiritual truths or concepts that lie behind things – for instance – you can burn a book, but you cannot burn an idea – you can destroy a bridge, but you cannot destroy the concept of a bridge.

What lasts are not the tangible things, eventually they will all fade away – what lasts is what's in the heart.

And so, the question remains – what do you love the most?

If you really want to know then consider what do you spend the most time and energy pursuing – is it things or is it spiritual growth?

Answer that question honestly and you'll have a good evaluation of yourself as a follower of Christ.

I read a statement someone once said that really struck me:

“In contrasting Abraham and Lot – Abraham was the kind of man who, if his business interfered with his faith, gave up his business – while Lot was the kind of man who, if his faith interfered with his business, gave up his faith.”

What kind of person are you – do you love Jesus more than the things that constantly surround you in daily living?

Let me end.

Perhaps the question Jesus asked Peter was left open deliberately – because the 'these' is different for every one of us – we need to identify what it is in our own lives. We all need to look at ourselves realistically and face honestly the question of our love for Jesus.

It's an important question because it not only demands a response – it also demands responsibility.

Jesus said to Peter – “if you truly love me, then feed my sheep.”

You see, after all has been said and done – our love for Jesus is shown in our service for the Kingdom of God – in other words – if we love, we serve – if we do not serve, then we do not love.

The challenge for each of us is to consider our level of devotion to our living Lord.

As you come to the Lord's Table this morning hear Jesus ask you the question “Do you love me?” – and as you respond listen for the “then”