

When they finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord, he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' *John 21.15.*

John, Alan, and Ian, may I first of all congratulate you on your ordination as Elders of the URC and on your induction to this congregation of St Paul's? This is a big day in your lives, a big step in your personal Christian journey. It's also a big day for St Paul's, for as elders you join the others elders who are the spiritual leaders of this congregation. The eldership is the glory of the URC. It is so important that one of the churches which formed the URC in 1972 was named after the Greek word for elder, *presbyter*. The Presbyterian Church has always valued the eldership so that our congregations are not run by a one-man-band of a clergyman, but by a *team*. We don't make a distinction between clergy and laity. We are all part of the people of God. Like any organisation we need leadership and direction. That's where the elders come in. Ministers are elders also, ordained just as you have been today. By 'ordained' I mean ordered. There must be order in congregations, or there will be chaos. We believe that God calls certain people to be set aside for for certain tasks in the church. One of those tasks is leadership. We're not a club. We exist to bring people to Christ as Saviour and Lord. Our motto outside says it all: 'to know Christ and to make him known'. All our fund-raising, meetings, and care of buildings are all for that one purpose of knowing Christ and making him known. That's what I mean by spiritual leadership, and as leaders we must never forget our primary purpose behind all our church activities.

So, on behalf of the congregation, I want to thank you for discerning God's call in your lives and for responding to it. There's no real job description. Just be a Christian. Be a Christian example in the congregation. You will find it a bit daunting when you first visit the homes in your district, but I can assure you the people won't bite. They will appreciate the fact that you have given up time to visit them and to concern yourself with their families.

Recently the elders of our local URC congregations had an Away Day in Christchurch Hall. I absolutely loathe conferences, but this was fantastic. It was good to meet other elders and the speaker, the Revd Roy Searle of the Northumbria Community, was superb. I mention him because he did us all a great favour. He laid before us the portion of scripture which we have just read, *John 21*, where the risen Lord Jesus appeared to Peter. And what did Jesus ask him? Was it, 'Do you love the church? Are you a great organiser? Are you a powerful evangelist? No. Jesus asked Peter one simple question, 'Simon, do you love me?' I know lots of ministers who are fantastic organisers, ferocious workers, brilliant speakers, but do they love the Lord Jesus? There are elders and church members who work so hard for the church, but, again, do they love the Lord Jesus? We can be so busy in church that we forget Jesus.

And how can we love Jesus? By talking to him in prayer; by treasuring his words and deeds as we read the Bible each day. How many elders come to Bible Study? We can love Jesus by living lives which please him and by loving his people, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But what a beautiful question it is that Jesus asked Peter? He didn't ask him if he was a good person, or was he good at standing up and telling others about Jesus. He simply asked him, 'Peter, do you love me?' And when Peter said, 'Yes, Lord', he gave him a job, 'Then feed my sheep'.

Jesus asks *all* us Christians that one simple question, 'Do you love me?' He doesn't expect us to be supermen and superwomen. He knows, because he himself said it, 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak'. He just wants us feeble, sinful weak creatures to love him. It is the only qualification to be an elder: 'do you love Jesus?' If people can see that you do, your ministry here among this congregation will be powerful. Jesus says to you new elders, 'Do you love me? Then feed my sheep'.

Roy Searle not only brought this Bible passage to our notice, but he reminded us that when Jesus said to Peter, 'On you, Peter, this rock, I will build my church', Peter was about as far from being a rock as it was possible to be. If you new elders feel pretty inadequate, let me tell you that Peter was *the* Mr Inadequate. He tried to walk on water and sank like a stone. Jesus called him 'Satan' when he wouldn't accept that the Son of Man had to suffer: 'get behind me Satan, you savour the things of men, not the things of God'.

And if that was not enough, the final failure was when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. St Luke tells us that when Peter denied knowing Jesus the third time, Jesus actually turned round and looked straight at him. How would he ever forget that look? What a terrible failure he was!

And yet it was on *him* that Jesus said he would build his church. After his resurrection the risen Lord Jesus came looking for Peter. He had some unfinished business with him. If Peter had seen that look in Jesus's eyes, Jesus had also seen the look of sadness and failure in Peter's face. He couldn't leave him like that. Jesus came back, not to tell him off and say, 'The deal's off. You flunked it. You're no good.'

As Peter had denied Christ three times, so the Saviour asked him three times, 'Do you love me?' Here, friends, is the very heart of the gospel. It really isn't about what you can do for God. It's about what God can do for you. That's why it is *good* news. Christianity isn't about perfection, moral improvement, being good enough, deserving heaven, rewards for good behaviour. It's about how God deals with failures like us. How Christ came back to deal with Peter is our pattern.

I know I fail Christ every day. I try my best, but it isn't that great. I can make a good show of my Christianity, but I know what's really in my heart. I know my mixed motives. But I also know that Jesus will never ask me, 'Have you passed the test? Are you good enough now?' He simply asks me, 'Brian, do you love me?' And he knows I do. And he says to me, 'Then feed my sheep, Brian. Feed my sheep'.

The one thing that convinces me that the Church must be a divine institution is the knowledge that some of the greatest rascals have been its ministers, beginning with cowards like Peter, and including people like the Borgias and twerps like me. And yet the church is still growing 2,000 years later. It must be divine. All Jesus asks of us is, 'Do you love me?'