

The third time [Jesus] said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.'

John 21.17.

I do think that the gospel accounts of Christ's resurrection appearances to his disciples over the forty days after Easter are among the most glorious passages of scripture. They speak of new life, hope, encouragement and grace. Wasn't it sheer grace that the risen Lord Jesus came back to Doubting Thomas to give him the hard, physical proof that he so much needed? What a Saviour, that he didn't cast Thomas aside as an unbeliever who had failed the test! What a gracious Lord, that he came to Mary in the garden, consumed with grief, and called her by her name, 'Mary'! What a patient friend that he should come alongside Cleopas and his companion walking back to Emmaus! Here were the two, depressed and defeated that the bad guys had finally finished off their beloved Jesus, and yet, unknown to them, the risen Lord Jesus came alongside them. He met them where they were, and led them on from their defeatism to the joy of seeing him as he broke bread with them.

These beautiful gospel accounts are preserved in scripture for us to cherish 2000 years later. If we today find it hard to believe that God raised his Son from the dead that first Easter Day, the Bible tells us that the disciples found it just as difficult then. Neither Thomas, Mary, Peter, nor Cleopas believed it either, even though Jesus had told them he would be raised on the third day. And yet Jesus came back to prove that he was really, physically, bodily alive. These

gospel accounts also tell us that, like Jesus, we shall be raised a body, but a changed body. Take time to read these passages sometime this Easter. They bring us all hope.

And no passage brings us more hope than the account we just read in *John* 21 of the risen Lord Jesus appearing to Peter. Peter's pretty despondent too, isn't he? Jesus is dead. It's all over. What's he going to do now with the rest of his life. That fabulous dream is all over now. So he goes back to the only thing he knows - fishing, *John* 21.1-3... Talk about being depressed! Not only was the Jesus-dream over, he couldn't even catch fish now! He 'blanked' as we say. But then this stranger appeared. Again, note that there was nothing strange or ghost-like about him. He was very normal looking, just unfamiliar, v4... When he told them to cast on the other side, they had a fantastic haul, 153 in fact, v11... They then realised who it was, and in typically over-the-top behaviour Peter dived in, vv7-11... And just to make it clear that Jesus was not a ghost he actually had breakfast with them, vv12-13...

So again we see the pattern: the risen Lord Jesus was a body, a changed body, and yet a familiar body; something new and something old, the old familiar Jesus yet changed.

But what makes this account so beautiful is the conversation Jesus then had with Peter after breakfast by the lakeside. After breakfast Jesus asked Peter, 'Simon, do you love me? Do you love me even more than these your friends?' What a strange thing to ask him! And even stranger is the fact that Jesus asked him the same question three times. Why three?

Well, we have to go back in the story to remember that

Jesus once said to Peter, 'When the cock crows twice, you will deny me thrice'. And that is absolutely what happened. When Jesus was arrested, Peter followed at a distance. Three people in the courtyard asked him, 'Do you know this man Jesus?' Three times he denied it. Luke gives us a chilling detail. When for the third time Peter angrily denied knowing Jesus, the Lord turned round and looked right at him. How would Peter ever live with himself again after such moral cowardice? How would he ever forget the Master looking right into his eyes as he told his weak and snivelling lie? He had been put to the test and he had failed miserably. I'm not sure we need to be rich to be happy, but I do think we need to respect ourselves. How would Peter ever be able to lift his head high again?

Everything that Christianity is about is to be found in this conversation the risen Lord Jesus had with Peter after breakfast. First, is the fact that Jesus actually came back to Peter, even after he had so pathetically denied knowing him. He could so easily have cast him aside as useless and pathetic. But he didn't. Jesus came back to him. And second, and even more important, he came back to give Peter what he personally needed. Thomas needed proof. Jesus came back and gave him proof. 'Here, Thomas, put your hands into my sides. Touch me'. Mary needed to hear the Master say her name again. He came back in the garden and simply said, 'Mary'. It was the reassurance that the relationship was still real that she so desperately craved. But Peter was a man weighed down by guilt, and shame and self-loathing. *He* needed absolution. And Jesus came back and gave him absolution. Three times Peter denied

Jesus. Three times Jesus asked him, 'Simon, do you love me?'
Jesus let rewind the tape and get it right this time.

And here is the very best bit. Jesus *then* went on to give him a job, a big job: 'Then feed my sheep'. Jesus trusted the untrustworthy Peter with the task of looking after his people. 'Feed my sheep'. What a great and a gracious Saviour! He not only came back to Peter to give him a second chance, but he even promoted him! It's a wonderful episode in the gospels, and one which, as I said, summarises everything that Christianity is about: grace, amazing grace, undeserved love from God, new beginnings, second chances.

Perfection is not the name of the game. We're not capable of it, and Jesus *knows* that. He *knows* what's in you. He *knows* that the spirit is willing, and the flesh, *your* flesh, is weak. He *knew* that Peter would deny him, before Peter did! Perfection is not what it's about: *repentance* is. When Peter heard that cock crowing, he went out and wept *bitterly*.

Jesus doesn't exist to set us impossibly high moral tasks and then to condemn us for failing. He exists to save us. The Good Shepherd left behind the 99 sheep to go looking for the lost one. He came back to give Thomas a second chance. He came to Peter, not to say, 'You failed me', but to *restore* him.

Everything you need to know about our gracious, loving God is in this passage. 'We are great sinners' is a mighty truth, and an even mightier truth is that Jesus is a great Saviour. The only thing written above the door to heaven is the one word 'repentance'. The rest is amazing grace!