

DO YOU LOVE ME?
10th April 2016
Easter III
Baptism, Confirmation and Sung Eucharist
St Michael, Cornhill
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Back in the 1970s/1980s - for all I know it may be the same now - so-called T.groups were very popular. T, I think, meant 'therapy'. The groups were aimed at 'sensitivity training'. Part of the process would be an open seminar with a rather terrifying 'facilitator'. The seminar was silent until a brave soul broke the silence. There was tell of one where after a forty minute silence, the facilitator asked: 'What sort of silence was that, then? Was it a threatening silence? Was it a productive silence? Was it a fruitful silence? Was it an intriguing silence?' One adventurous soul responded: 'Well, I thought myself it was a pretty quiet silence.' He copped it, as they say. He became the focus of interrogation for much of the rest of the seminar.

Part of the aim of this approach was to build up trust within the group. Quite how such aggressive tactics achieved this, I'm not sure. Another element in the process was the trust game. One group member was blindfolded and then had to allow her or himself to fall backwards into the arms of the others. All pretty terrifying but also telling. Trust can take years to nurture and be lost again in a flash, in a careless phrase.

In relation to trust, today's gospel reading includes a most powerful and moving passage. Following his resurrection, Jesus encounters Peter and asks him: 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' Peter replies, 'Yes, Lord; you know I love you.' Jesus responds: 'Feed my lambs.' The same dialogue repeats altogether three times. Finally Peter appears hurt and even indignant, 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.' The whole episode is told with some care. Even the call to 'feed my sheep, tend my lambs' and so on conjures up a scene of *real* tenderness – so why was Jesus so persistent in his questioning?

Well, the answer is not difficult to come by. This same Peter, the most headstrong, yet often the most outspokenly courageous of Jesus' followers falls at the final fence. When the pressure is on, once Jesus is arrested and when all insecurities are exposed, Peter denies Jesus. Jesus had predicted this in response to an earlier rather hurt outburst from Peter: 'Before the cock crows you will deny me *three times*.' Just as Jesus predicts so Peter acts. Immediately after the third denial he breaks down in uncontrollable sobbing.

Here, in this morning's lection, and uniquely in John's gospel, Peter is given the opportunity to re-affirm his real trust in Jesus. Three times Jesus gets Peter to affirm his love and to promise to fulfil the sequel, that is, to 'feed Jesus' lambs.' Commitment to God means giving everything. That is what Peter had seen happen in Christ's passion, his death and resurrection. Jesus here predicts the same thing of Peter: '...when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' Peter will suffer a similar fate to Jesus, his Lord.

In our present world this story speaks volumes. Just over twenty years ago, we went as a family to live and work in Norfolk. Norfolk people, we were told, didn't quite believe in themselves and so could be uncertain of others. It was true. I can't remember how many times early on I'd be asked in a broad Norfolk brogue: 'Do you like Norfolk?' 'Yes, I'd reply.' 'Do you really like Norfolk?' 'Yes I really love Norfolk.' That made you their friend for life. 'Graveyard of ambition', they used to say, 'No-one wants to leave Norfolk' – and there's much truth in it.

At the heart of all this lay a deep need to feel trust. If you fulfilled what you'd promised then that trust would build up. Well, today, remembering our baptisms and confirmations, we could not have been given a better gospel reading. For today, God's Church will grow visibly. Three more people will be baptised and two will complete that process in confirmation. What exactly is at stake? Well, let's start with Rory, the crown prince! For Rory means *red-haired king*.

Rory's godparents will make vows and promises to care for him no matter what buffeting the world may offer. So, we invest great trust in their promise to care for Rory, alongside Laura and James. Rory's life is literally placed in trust this morning. Then James and Sarah will make this decision themselves – they will work to fulfil their own trust in God.

That may at times be uncomfortable and even challenging but, just as Jesus asked Peter, so in rather different language, they are being asked 'Do you love me?' They will say yes, and then be asked to feed and tend God's sheep. These sheep are all those people who will cross their paths throughout their lives. That's quite a tall order.

Such commitment, such growth of trust, runs rather against the grain of our society. Commitment is often an unpopular word. Not only that, but we live in a very untrusting society. So a great responsibility is laid upon all who respond to Christ.

Hence, if we - as individuals, as a church community, and as God's Church universally - cannot be trusted then all is lost. So our answer today and on all days must be emphatically:

'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.'

Amen

Readings

Acts. 9. 1-6.

Revelation. 5. 11-14.

John. 21. 1-19