

The Third Time Of Asking

Peter denied him three times, and now Jesus asks for his love three times. It must be that the two moments are connected, and it should make us think how our failures can be succeeded by making-good.

The Denying of Jesus

When we fail one another there is always a backwash, a legacy of the hurt. We may say that we have forgiven the offence, but damage remains, the knowledge of weakness that bedevils the future of our relationship. How can we restore that? It helps if we manage to trust one another again, and if fidelity is slowly reinforced (*he asked him a third time*). But with God the situation is different. God has no illusions and therefore no suspicions: *he knows of what we are made, he remembers that we are dust*. For God, there is no hardship in forgiveness. The hardship is all on our side. We find it difficult to repent, or to seek reconciliation, or to trust ourselves enough to pick up our pieces and begin again.

He Wept Bitterly

Peter has already had his experience of repentance, in the moment where (in the first three Gospels) he bursts into tears during the Passion. He weeps because his own promises were broken; but the prediction of Jesus was simultaneously fulfilled (*the Lord turned, and looked directly at Peter*). Now Jesus, risen from the death Peter would have prevented, embodies everything Peter could not have forecast, and Peter feels keenly that he has lost his closeness to Jesus, the precious relationship where he had seemed to be pre-eminent. So it is to be expected that Jesus would here give us a lesson in the rebuilding of damaged trust. I always imagine that they are in a kind of snooze at this point: the fishermen have been hard and fruitlessly at work all night, and now they have been unexpectedly fed, and have encountered the Lord. Although the story has been sewn in to the Gospel as *the third time Jesus showed himself*, it is also clearly not part of the original Gospel (which reaches its clear conclusion at the end of the previous chapter).

I suspect that this scene, whoever wrote it, was once presented as the apostles' *first* meeting of the risen Jesus, Peter's first encounter with the reality of Resurrection. If so, it would make the healing of Peter even more powerful. *Simon, son of John* (his formal, Sunday name - nothing informal here) *do you love me more than these others do?* It is as if he has read Peter's mind; but they were both used to his power to do this. The point is, that Peter has probably been asking himself the same question. Jesus isn't asking for information. He is asking for a promise. In fact for three promises.

You Will Stretch Out Your Hands

Peter will be crucified; that is, put plainly, what Jesus is promising him. Peter knows that the real problem between him and Jesus wasn't created during the Passion, by the denials. It was there before that, and it had to do with their different view of the future. Peter had his own plans for Jesus, and they didn't include the Cross. Now that the glory of Jesus is accomplished, which could *only* happen through the Cross, Peter's only hope is that somehow he will be enabled to share in it. That is what Jesus is telling him will happen: further, he will not have to find his way alone: *someone else will take you where you wanted not to go*. Surely that is the work of the Spirit, the Paraclete Jesus promised, who would comfort the disciples and teach them all truth, guiding them to remain in Christ to the end, and to be with him where he is. *In this way Jesus indicated the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God*. But he also indicates the way in which our relationships can be restored: by the wholehearted openness of his *Do you love me?* and by the promise of the shared destination, the faithfulness to the end (*after this he said: Follow me*) which tells us that we have our place assured in one another. *Fr Philip*