

Third Sunday of Easter, C – May 1, 2022 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15 & 8:30am Sunday Masses – 875 words

The account of Peter’s reconciliation with Christ is surely one of the most beautiful and most beloved scenes in all of Sacred Scripture. It’s one of those passages that we can easily place ourselves in and relate to – just like last Sunday, when we heard about Thomas, who doubted. Most if not all of us have doubted and been weak in our faith at times throughout our lives; so, also, have we been like Peter, having denied Christ by our sins, subsequently finding his love anew. Jesus said, “Peter, do you love me...?”, and we, together with Peter, reply, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”.

But there is something rather surprising happening “behind the scenes” in this gospel passage: it has to do precisely with the love about which our Lord speaks, and the love which Peter, in turn, professes. I say that it happens “behind the scenes” because it’s not apparent when we hear this reading in English. You see, the single English word “love” covers a wide range of concepts: a person might say, “I love Italian food”; “I love my country”; “I love God”; “I love my spouse”. These “loves” are not all the same, and we usually know that from the context, the tone of voice, and so forth. But the gospel was written in Greek, a language that has four different words to express the different levels of types of love. In the dialogue between Christ and Peter, two of those different words for love are used.

So let’s listen to what it might sound like if we made a clearer distinction between the two different words that are used. Jesus says the first time, “Peter, do you love me, even to the point of laying down your life for me – more than these others do?” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you like a friend.” Again, Christ says, “Peter, do you love me, even to the point of laying down your life for me?” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you like a friend.” Finally – a third time – Jesus speaks: “Peter, do you love me like a friend?” And Peter replies, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you like a friend.”

Did you catch the difference? Christ asks Peter the first two times if he has the highest form of love for him: self-sacrificial love. It’s the sort of love that the Lord has for us, and that he had just shown in his Passion and Death on the Cross. But Peter responds every time with a lower form of love: brotherly love. The third time, Jesus comes down to Peter’s level. It’s as if Christ is saying: “OK, I’ll take it; this is a start.” But as we’ll see in a moment, the Lord is not going to settle for less in the end; he has a greater goal in mind for Peter.

Jesus then lays before Peter a sort of timeline of his life. “Amen, amen, I say to you,” he says, “when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Christ is effectively saying: “When you were younger, you were more selfish and self-involved; your love was immature. When you are old, though, your love will be perfected and you will lay down your life.” And where is Peter now on that timeline? Somewhere in-between. He’s at the point of loving the Lord like a friend, even a good friend; his love still needs to grow, though – he still has a way to go.

Well, where are we at on this same timeline? If Christ were to talk to us about how we were when we were younger and what we are called to when we are older, where would we find ourselves in-between those two points? We can surely look back over our lives and see a definite deepening of our love of God. But he is always calling us to something that is greater. We are called to a mature and profound love such that we can say, with the apostles in the first reading, “We must obey God rather than men” – even when doing so means taking up the cross. We are called to a mature and profound love that leads us to avoid sin because we fear offending the

God who is all-good and deserving of all our love – not just because we fear the punishment that our sins might merit us.

Let our Lord's question echo in our hearts and minds this week: "Peter, do you love me?" – "Do you love me with a profound and mature love, through which you would put me above all else and live totally for me?" He asks us this, too. This is how they love in heaven; it is the love to which we are called. Christ accepts us where we are at today, but he has a goal in mind for us and wants to help us get there. Jesus, please do help us: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!"