

Sermon Notes 21-5-23 (SC)

Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Passage: John 21:4-19

Title: “How do you feed sheep?”

Thoughtful people often ask foolish questions. Thoughtful people ask foolish questions. I don't know if you have found the same, but it seems to me at least, that it is the more thoughtful personalities who are prepared to ask the obvious questions that others are too embarrassed to ask for fear it will make them look ill-informed or silly. That's not a particularly theological insight, it's more an observation about human behaviour. But we start here, because I want to ask my own foolish question, in the hope it might turn out to be thoughtful. And here is my foolish question:

How *do* you feed sheep?

Now, for those of you who look a little puzzled, let me offer some context. For the last couple of months, we have been looking, as a church, at John's gospel. And we have been paying particular attention to the one-on-one encounters with Jesus. You see, more than any other gospel, John is concerned to record those quiet, private moments, where Jesus teaches face-to-face. And across all these episodes there is a common thread. In all these exchanges, something about meeting with Jesus is transformative. In John 1, Nathanael's dry sense of humour, his cynicism is challenged, and he becomes a follower of Christ. In John 3, the leading scribe Nicodemus is set on this trajectory that moves him from operating in the shadows to being publicly identified with Jesus at the crucifixion. In John 4 the woman at the well is transformed from the village-talking point to the first evangelist.

And today we come to John 21, and the exchange between the risen Jesus and the apostle Simon-Peter. And the atmosphere is tense. This is a confrontation.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?

Yes Lord, you know I love you.

Then feed my lambs.

Now to set the scene, we need to cast our minds back to what we have seen of Simon in this gospel so far. Simon is headstrong, sure of himself; in chapter 6 Simon leads the other disciples by professing, “we have believed and come to know that [you Jesus] are the Holy One of God.” In John 13, Simon Peter says of Jesus, “I will lay down my life for you!”

But he doesn't. In chapter 18, after Jesus' arrest, Simon Peter immediately denies any knowledge of him. And with that denial still hanging over him, Jesus, in the presence of 6 other disciples, tests Simon-Peter's fidelity. For each of the three times that Peter denied him, Jesus now requires him to confess his love.

Simon, son of John, do you love me?

*Lord you know everything, you know that I love you.
Feed my sheep.*

All of which leads me back to that foolish question – how do you feed sheep?

Now we might respond at this point, and say, “But Jesus is of course talking figuratively. He is talking about Simon-Peter’s future work to support the life of the Church.”

Well yes, OK. But why then did Jesus phrase it like this? Why not simply say: “Build the Church.” Or “preach the gospel.” Why – “feed my sheep?”

I suppose, first and foremost to remind us that God himself is the shepherd of his people Israel. That Jesus Christ is our over-shepherd, and that the Church therefore, in all its broken glory, is uniquely his possession. That’s an important reminder in the age of celebrity-pastors and in a world in which social media can launch winsome and charismatic personalities and elevate style over substance. The Church belongs to Jesus.

But it tells us as well (and this my point) that Church leadership is about feeding the sheep. So, how do I do that?

At the start of this week, I didn’t think my sermon preparation would involve researching shepherding techniques in 1st Century Palestine. One of the things I have learned about that region of the middle east, moving west into the Sinai peninsula, is that finding ample food supplies to sustain the flock is the biggest challenge for the shepherd. It can be a fertile land, but it can also be a harsh environment. So, the shepherd feeds and tends to his flock by keeping them on the move. Not change for change’s sake, but the shepherd ever leads and drives the flock forward to find fresh pasture, places of nourishment. It’s not a case of moving them from one lush field in the Yorkshire Dales to the one next door. But a matter of travelling through sparse and barren wilderness, sometimes through dangerous and treacherous territory, to find places of sustenance.

The role of the shepherd then, is to live life on the road *with* the flock, guiding them to places of nurture and sustenance. That is what Jesus now commands Peter to do. To guide the Church through barren wilderness, through dangerous territory, to find places of nurture and sustenance.

Now, this week, a report was shared by the policy Institute at King’s College London. And it made for grim reading. It claimed that people in the UK are less likely to believe in God than almost any other country. And that hurts to hear. But it also published some surprising findings as well. It claimed that the youngest generation of adults, Gen Z, are more likely than previous generations to have firmly-held beliefs about life after death, but are less likely to have any formal contact with the Church. So, they are more likely to believe in life after death, and yet less likely to have contact with the Church.

So, how do we feed these sheep?

How do we lead and guide the disaffected older generations? How do we connect with the questions of the young? How can we lead the flock, and not fall into decline? What does the ministry of preaching look like in an increasingly secular age? What does Holy Communion look like in an increasingly secular age? How can we lead people to these spaces, so that their desperate hunger for God may be satisfied?

If you love the Church, I ask you to reflect on these things. How can we feed Christ's sheep? Pray that next Sunday, Pentecost, might be significant in how we respond to that challenge.

But there's one more important feature to note here:

There are all sorts of reasons why we might have found our way into the fringes of church life. Some of us looked for a space in which to belong. Some of us love that sense of community. Some of us found comfort in the routine and ritual of church life. Some of us were brought up in the midst of the church and it's all we have ever known. There are a thousand reasons, and these are all good reasons, as to how we found our way to the fringes of church life. But leadership in the Church begins with Peter's confession.

Lord, you know all things, you know I love you.

The principal qualification for leadership in the Church is that you love the risen Lord.

Friends, if you love the Lord Jesus Christ, and wish to explore what it means for you to lead and guide God's people to places of nurture and sustenance - Please don't sit on that feeling, but speak to me, or to someone here that you trust, today.

Leadership in the Church begins with Peter's confession: "Lord, you know all things, you know I love you."

Leadership in the Church is about guiding God's people through difficult terrain, to places of nurture and sustenance.

Are you called to share in Peter's commission?