

Sermon on John 21: 15-17

Do you love me?

What do you answer after a shared breakfast when somebody asks you: Do you love me? Is there any freedom left to say No?
Does the person who is expected to answer have a choice?
And what is even more difficult: how do you respond to the question “do you love me more than these?”, when “all these” are around you? ... listening curiously ...?

Would we do what Jesus did: ask one of our weakest friends the same question three times in a row? Do you love me?

On the other hand: don't we sometimes tend to take love between two persons too much for granted? Thinking that once love is there, it will never change or disappear? Don't we sometimes take love for granted, without realising that it was lost long ago in the exhausting struggles of everyday?

Do you love me?
After all we have gone through?
After all the experiences of pain and disappointment?
Do you love me?
...even though the other day you let me down?
...even though your words have hurt me so much?
Can I be certain of your love towards me?
Should I reassure myself every now and again?
Should I ask you more often: do you love me?

Jesus asks Peter early in the morning. Do you love me?
...asks after a frustrating night they had all worked through.
Night is fading, but the day, with its light and warmth, has not yet come.

It is this time between night and day...
...the time when worriers like me and many others tend to lie awake imagining the overwhelming burdens of the day, but not finding the energy to get up and face the demands of what lies ahead.
...the time when we think we cannot face reality because we have lost the strength we usually believe we're given every single day...
...the time when we need faith and confidence, but cannot quite get hold of them.

Between night and day we are still tired, vulnerable, anxious, weak...
It is a sensitive time, a delicate situation...

...and Peter remembers another night:
The fire was still burning.
Peter tried to keep close to stay warm.
He couldn't face leaving this fire: he'd rather lie, and say that he had nothing to do with this man from Galilee, that he didn't know who Jesus was, had never met him before...
For the warmth of the fire, Peter paid the price of betraying his friend.

And when he realised what he was doing, it was too late.
The cock had already crowed three times.

We all know how shocked you can be to discover your true self: how cowardly, how mean, how unfaithful you can be...
We all know the dark sides of human life. ...how far away light seems to be sometimes.

Just to carry on, so as not to lose himself in the despair of those terrible days, Peter had gone back to doing what he'd always done: he went fishing.
And suddenly Jesus' question cruelly recalled this terrible night of his betrayal. Three times he'd said "no". No, I don't know him. Three times for the sake of a warm coal fire.
And now he is asked three times – for the sake of love. Do you love me?

Jesus would so much like to see Peter with a loving heart...he's not asking for plans, words or intentions - but for love.

Jesus asks Peter "do you love me?" and opens a very different world: the world of love and caring, the world of understanding and belonging together, the world in which emotions count and affection is essential...

And then Jesus says "Tend and feed my sheep, Peter" and suggests "and follow me".

This is not an order. It is a request.

Jesus tries to win Peter over to his life of love, tries to attract him rather than telling him what to do.

And that sets Peter free: not only to remember the coal fire in the night of his betrayal, his own walking on the water and sinking, his over-hasty confessions of faith and his broken promises, but also his strengths and abilities.

Peter can then see not only the Peter who ran away to his shame, but also the friend of Jesus who rediscovers his love.

And love bears all things...!

"Peter – do you love me?"

And Peter more or less desperately says: "Lord, you know everything...you know that I love you..."

Peter learns to accept, appreciate and love himself with all the bright and the dark parts of his story!

And loving himself again, he can look away from his own story of limitations and questions and become free for others:

Tending and caring ... is what he is able to do now!

The key to the new beginning is Jesus' unbroken friendship. His love can bring forth afresh the love within Peter, can call him to a new life and enable him to work for God – and to follow Jesus.

Peter can now love – love himself and love the others – just as much and as intensively as a human being can love: not more and not less... with all the pain

and risk that is involved, but with all the power to forgive and accept that Jesus can provide.

Do you love me?

Jesus asks us, too.

As Christians we are called to love. We are called to love God, our neighbours and ourselves.

What do we answer? How strong is our passion for God? Our love for Jesus? If you remember the Holy Week meditations which we shared with Friedenskirche in the week before Easter, you may also recall a quite tricky passage in the 2nd chapter of Peter Storey's book "Listening at Golgotha". Here Peter Storey writes: "Some tell us that following Jesus is a simple matter of inviting him into our hearts. But when we do that, Jesus always asks, "May I bring my friends?" And when we look at them, we see that they are not the kind of company we like to keep. The friends of Jesus are the outcasts, the marginalized, the poor, the homeless, the rejected – the lepers of life. We hesitate and ask, "Jesus, must we really have them, too?" And Jesus replies, "Love me – and love my friends!""

Love me... Love my friends... is God's commandment given through Jesus. And if loving Jesus and loving God necessarily includes loving all the so-called lepers of life, I am not always sure whether I really want that all the time. I am not sure whether I always want to love God – with all that it means in my life... Sometimes, I must admit, I could do with a break. Sometimes all this loving gets a bit much... And I am almost sure that some of you know these moments, too!? Those times, in which I'd love to have a break from all the loving, are probably those moments in which – besides loving God and my neighbour – I have forgotten two things: that I am asked to love myself, too. And what is just as essential: that God loves me, and wants me – just as I am. Even when I feel that I am a failure at loving God, I am invited to discover over and over again that God loves me. God doesn't care whether I am half-hearted or unsure. God just wants me and loves me.

I once read the beautiful sentence (I can't remember where): God believes in you, even if you don't believe in him!

This is exactly what Jesus shows Peter in this conversation about love on that remarkable morning at the lake.

God does not stop loving us, even when we stop loving him. He or she will always come and meet us again asking: Do you love me?

It comes out of God's love for us that our love for God can be seen. God loves us as far as our souls can reach. God loves us in the bright days of our confident faith and in the times when the light of our faith seems dim. God loves us freely; without conditions, but with passion and energy, with simplicity and directness and confidence.

Do you remember the verse John writes: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another".

It is out of God's love for us that we love God, and one another, and ourselves.

It may seem strange to be called or commanded to love...

And sometimes we may feel that love is not something that happens on demand. You can't turn it on like a tap.

But it clearly is our calling: to love!

And in recognising the call, and in seeking to respond to it, we may be careful to find out what Christian love really is.

Is great love perhaps quieter than we sometimes imagine? Is love sometimes neither in the storm nor in the earthquake, but in the still small voice?

Can we sometimes be caught in God's outpouring love without even noticing or reflecting it?

Jesus responds to Peter's confession of love by giving him a task, a responsibility: Feed my sheep. Love my people. Care for them.

Perhaps this is the true result of discovering God's overwhelming love for us: that our days are given a direction, that our lives take on meaning, that we begin to understand what it means to live in God's presence, and that nothing happens outside the presence of God – even if it is denying, failing, aching, suffering or grieving.

The love of God, being loved by God, loving God, is what gives our lives their shape and form, their texture and their fullness.

And if we feel that we do not know how to love God, or how to feel God's love for us, it may help to "feed God's sheep", to care for others, to do deeds of love, to show our faith and our love by our actions, as we sometimes sing in one of our children's songs.

In doing deeds of love – may they be ever so small – we bring to others the fruits of the love of God, offering that love to them, even when we feel unable to love ourselves. Living in community always bears the chance that somebody will come along and do deeds of love for us, and thus shows us how to find a way of loving ourselves again.

This is what makes Sunday mornings, and Tuesday mornings or weekday evenings at church and with church friends so valuable for me. ...to love, and to be loved!

Let me now ask one last question and try some simple answers to it. How do we love God?

...surely, by offering assurance of God's love to others, by taking it into our relationships, or by talking about our faith.

We love God, too, when we are present in the places in the world where there is poverty, when we try to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, care for those who are ill, welcome those who are strangers...

We love God by praying for others, by holding them up to God in love. We love God by seeking to preserve the world which was given to us in creation.

We love God when we get involved in seeking justice and peace and in speaking out against discrimination and rejection.

We love God when we are patient and honest with ourselves, our failings and our strengths, when we have the grace to see the presence of Christ in others, in their strengths and in their failings.

We love God when we can use the gifts we are given to help, serve and support others.

We love God when we spend time waiting and listening to what God wants us to do.

In all of these we love God, and give answer to the question: Do you love me?
Amen.