

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

Picture the scene – the sun is beginning to get low in the sky, it's getting dark, and the disciples have had at the very least a very tumultuous and surprising and shocking few days. And so in a bid to give themselves and their families some well-earned normality Peter decides he will set sail and go fishing. Peter knew fishing well and this was something he and his disciples could do together that wouldn't be likely to be stressful. And so they set off for a night of hard work but something familiar. The only trouble is that against the odds after a long night in the dark with only their fishing lights to keep them awake they still hadn't caught a thing. Not even a tiddler!

And then just as the sun was beginning to rise and the dawn was breaking - from the shore a voice called out "children – have you not caught anything? Try the other side".

I'm guessing the temptation would be to be somewhat frustrated by the expert shouting from the shore but after a long fishless night it was worth a try. And sure enough they caught fish – many fish – 153 in total. So many that their nets should have broken. But they didn't.

And all of a sudden one of the disciples said to Peter "it's our Lord!", and Peter threw on his clothes, jumped in to the water and headed to the shore leaving his friends to haul in the fish. And there on the beach was their friend and Lord Jesus with a charcoal fire cooking fish and inviting them for breakfast.

And as they sat round the smoking fire Jesus took the bread and broke it and gave it to them and then he shared out the fish. And they **knew** it was their friend. Their stomachs and hearts were filled with Jesus' love. With the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the fish they could feel their spirits and confidence rising, their love for their friend and for each other intensifying in a way that was making them tingle.

But then came the bit which I guess Peter had played out in his mind many times following that dark time in the temple grounds – a conversation with

Jesus – you know those conversations that you don't really want to have but realise are heading right towards you...

And so Jesus comes straight out with it - "Peter, do you love me more than these?" to which Peter replies " You know I love you". Three times Jesus asks him and 3 times he replies that he does.

And Jesus response each time – Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

You can feel Peter's pain and embarrassment and hurt when Jesus asks him a third time if he loves him, but that's partly down to the painfully obvious parallel between just now and his three times denial of knowing Jesus before the cock crowed.

The thing is....this has to be one of the most uncomfortable but heartening passages in the Bible – in some ways it makes me think about the prodigal son and the immense welcome he has when he comes back, but also the seeming displeasure of his brother watching the son being given such a welcome and such praise when it's he who has been working away solidly since his brother upped and offed.

Jesus' response is to acknowledge that this has happened and to give Peter an opportunity to respond and then move on. There is no denying that Peter failed to admit to knowing Jesus on the night that he was taken away to be crucified. When the cock crowed Peter knew he'd got it wrong and was broken-hearted.

But Jesus' capacity for love and grace and mercy is immense – Peter righted his wrongs with Jesus and told him I imagine not just in word but in emotion just how much he truly loved him. Through Jesus' conversation with Peter we see that God's mercy is for everyone. Peter was to all intents and purposes reinstated and recommissioned.

God's mercy and grace and forgiveness is beautiful and gritty, simple and complicated all at the same time – for many it can be v hard to understand – for many people it can feel incomprehensible that God's forgiveness is something that they are good enough to receive.

And for others it is a barrier for them to try and understand how our God of love and mercy and forgiveness forgives ALL – even the most miserable sinners who speak up and show genuine sorrow or requests for forgiveness will never be turned away. Think of the soldier on the cross next to Jesus. These are challenges and truths which we need to work through with God and with others ...

God's immense grace and mercy and forgiveness is massively important in this passage today. But that's not the only thing that is important – With Jesus' forgiveness and mercy and love for Peter came a **call to action** - the instruction to feed and tend and nurture the lambs and sheep.

Having broken bread and eaten fish and blessed them all on the beach round the charcoal fire, and having had the conversation with Peter they were now to go out and bless others. They were to go out there, to look at things afresh, to challenge, to tend and feed and love. Just as Jesus' call from the shore had woken them up and told them not to drift, so we are called not to drift either.

We are never called to stand still, we are never called to be static in our faith and in our love. We are called to listen to the voice that calls to us from the shore and to tend and love and nurture all with whom we come in contact. Called "to be a people and a place where love works".

Jesus didn't charge Peter and his disciples with loving just **some** sheep though, he charged them with loving **all** sheep - not just the cute and fluffy ones!

I took a funeral for Mary on Friday at our church at Downhome which was surrounded by sheep with their lambs bleating away. Mary lived on her brother's farm and after he died she spent a lot of time looking after the calves and lambs. She wasn't that keen to begin with about the calves, but in time came to love them and their quirky ways. And she had a soft spot for lambing time and always worried about what she described as the poor little things out in the rain. Hers wasn't an easy life – it was hard hard work farming in all weathers and she would sometimes be carried away by a sheep while she was feeding them as she only had little legs. But she loved the sheep and the lambs because that's what she did and that's what you do.

Just as Jesus fed his disciples on the beach that day, so too we will be fed when we come forward this morning for Holy Communion and a blessing. And having done that we, like the disciples and Peter did that day, have a choice whether to respond to our encounter with Jesus where we have been blessed and nurtured by going out into the world and blessing and nurturing others....or not

Jesus places each of us in our own situations, in our own communities and groups and with a wide variety of people. And in doing so we therefore are placed to be people who can make the difference and love and tend and feed and challenge. Jesus doesn't use perfect people - think of Peter, think of Saul who became Paul. Jesus didn't give Peter or others a probationary period to see if he could make the grade. Jesus uses ordinary human beings each with unique characteristics and talents gifted to them by God to be used for his purposes.

Jesus calls us to be people of love, people of hope and of light, people of compassion and people who get their hands dirty and put love in to action. People who see a need and respond prayerfully and practically. Doing things like collecting for Christian Aid, cooking for a neighbour, visiting someone who doesn't often get visitors, volunteering for groups inside and out of church, listening, offering to pray for others, welcoming the stranger to our church, inviting our neighbour to church, offering hospitality and friendship to those on the shoreline of our lives – welcoming them in.... all those are ways of tending and loving. And allowing others to love and serve us too in love. We all need to be needed, we all need to be loved and we can all love in return.

We are never under any obligation to listen to the call of God and of Jesus – they will never force us to listen. But God will never go away or leave us, in fact he will often nudge us and whisper and call out to us in unexpected ways.....he will always stand at the shoreline of our life, call out to us and wait for us to respond – and when we do.....he will feed us and tend us and love us and walk with us as we in turn tend and feed and love all of his flock here on earth until in turn we see what love really truly is face to face.

Amen