

535 Feed My Sheep

Continuing from our last Reflection in Chapter 21 of John's Gospel, we read that when the disciples finally got to the shore "dragging the net with fishes ... they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread" (from vv. 8-9, KJV). Peter still had to deal somehow with the "unfinished business" of his denials of Jesus, denials which had been followed by "that look" from Jesus, and Peter's distraught reaction (Luke 22.61-62). So on that shore Peter must have been feeling particularly ill at ease in Jesus' presence, made more so by his six fishing companions being also there too. Whether or not they knew of Peter's denials by then, they must surely have sensed that "something was up".

So, perhaps to show Jesus that everything was "just fine" between them, "Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes ..." (John 21.11a) – acting as the leader, the strong man, the sleeves-rolled-up problem-solver on whom Jesus could totally rely! They then ate breakfast together in what must have been a rather odd atmosphere – for "none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord" (21.12). Did they eat in silence? Who did the talking, if anyone? And whatever would they have talked about?

Then at last the time came for Jesus to address "the Peter-problem" (v.15ff). It may be that Jesus asked His questions of Peter in front of the others – "So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter ..." (from v.15). This would have made things harder for Peter as he replied in front of the others, but it would also serve to show those others that Jesus had restored Peter to his leadership-role among them. On the other hand, we read in verse 20, "Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following ...". This suggests that Jesus had taken Peter aside, to walk with him alone along the beach: a private conversation, in which Peter's deep sorrows could be said, perhaps with further anguished tears, and Jesus' gracious forgiveness could be granted. As a result, Peter was forgiven and restored, and he would surely never forget Jesus' quiet words to him on that Galilee shore, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep, feed my sheep" (from vv.15-17).

Sure enough, a few weeks later "when the day of Pentecost was fully come ... and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost ..." (from Acts 2.1,4), it was Peter who took the lead when "the multitude came together" (from 2.6,14). He did indeed "feed those sheep", quoting from the prophet Joel, and then proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth, finishing with this great climax – "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly,

that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2.36). On hearing Peter’s words, many “were pricked in their heart”, shouting out, “What shall we do?” (from v.37). Peter’s answer was brief and clear – “Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”, and thereby they would receive forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost (from v.38). By God’s grace there followed a tremendous harvest of souls (v.41)!

That great Pentecost sermon by Peter in Jerusalem that day was still only to the Jews. Three years later Peter was firmly told by the Holy Spirit to go with those Gentile visitors northwards to Caesarea, and to enter the house of Cornelius, a Gentile Roman officer. Er, devout Jews do not enter Gentile houses! (Acts 10.19-29a). But in Christ, Peter and his fellow Jesus-believing Jews were being shown that – “if any man [be] in Christ, [he is] a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Corinthians 5.17), including the setting-aside of old divisions between Jew and Gentile: “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off (that is, us Gentiles,) are made nigh by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2.13-14). We see how Peter’s “feeding” of Cornelius and his companions was very similar to his message given previously in Jerusalem, concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and His resurrection, and the forgiveness of sins. The results in Cornelius’ house were also much the same – “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word”, and at Peter’s command, these new Gentile believers in Christ were baptized in the name of the Lord” (Acts 10.34-48).

Where do we fit in? From that Galilee shore through to the house of Cornelius and thereafter, we see how mightily God the Father, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit, used flawed-but-restored Simon Peter, to “feed Jesus’ sheep”. Here is great encouragement for us, for each one of us is also flawed-and-restored (eg., I John 1.8-9;2.1-2), and each one of us is also equipped and bidden to speak, as opportunities are given, of Jesus Christ, His resurrection and the forgiveness of sins.

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