

Sermon 4 May 2025 'Feed my sheep.'

John 21:15-19

This Gospel passage is one of the most wonderful passages in the Bible, and is certainly one of my favourites. I say that for two reasons. Firstly, it is a marvellous illustration of forgiveness, and secondly, it is a great example of how we should be expressing love – through service. This is a theme that is close to my heart, but first let's look at the context of this exchange between Jesus and Peter.

This takes place after the Resurrection and according to John's gospel, it is the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples. Some of the disciples had gone out fishing. They see Jesus on the shore and he calls out to them to come and have some breakfast. So they come ashore and Jesus has a fire going and is cooking some fish.

After breakfast Jesus asks Peter, 'Do you love me more than these?' Now, the first interesting point is this – what does he mean by 'these?' Is he referring to the boats and the fish? In which case, he is asking Peter if he loves him more than his job. That's probably a question that could be posed to many of us. What is our first priority? Making money or worshipping God.

However, I think he is referring to the other disciples when he says 'these.' The important thing to remember here is that it was Peter who, soon after Jesus was arrested, denied that he knew Jesus. So Jesus is giving Peter the chance to redeem himself, the chance to affirm his love for him. *'A third time Jesus asked him, "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep."' John 21:17.* Why does he put the question to him three times? Simply because it was three times that Peter denied he knew Jesus. So Jesus is sort of balancing the books, you might say.

Now going back to the two reasons why this is such a wonderful passage, and the first reason is that it is a marvellous illustration of forgiveness. In denying that he knew Jesus, not just once but three times, Peter has dropped the ball, well and truly. To continue the sporting analogy, what happens when you drop the ball repeatedly in a game? You get dropped from the team. Well, Jesus doesn't drop Peter from the team, and in fact he does the opposite – he gives him more responsibility; he gives him a major task to carry out. Jesus tells him to feed his sheep, in other words, to carry out his ministry. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but now he is passing that charge on to Peter. What a huge gesture of confidence, of faith in Peter this is.

Here is a man who just recently turned his back on Jesus and now he is being directed to take up his ministry. That is forgiveness. How does this relate to us? Well, we all turn our backs on Jesus at times, figuratively speaking, but that does not preclude us from taking up his mantle and doing our bit to feed his sheep. On the contrary, despite our weaknesses and failings, that is precisely what Jesus expects us to do. I find that both comforting and challenging.

The second reason why this is such a wonderful passage is that it reaffirms in a very unmistakable way the message that service is the most compelling way by which we can demonstrate love, whether that be love for God or love for others. Each time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, he follows up with the same directive, 'Feed my sheep.' In doing this, he aligns service with love. Service is an expression of love.

When people are on the receiving end of service, they feel valued and respected, they feel loved. Francis of Assisi directed his followers to worship Jesus through service. Both worship and service are

expressions of love. They are inextricably entwined. Love transforms, as we know, and so service transforms. In the end, service is very simply treating others with respect and kindness, giving time and care to others. When we do that, we can change lives. I want to share a true story with you.

In 1921, Lewis Lawes became warden at Sing Sing Prison on the outskirts of New York. No prison was tougher at the time. But when Lawes retired some 20 years later, that prison had become a humanitarian institution. Those who studied the system said the credit for the change belonged to Lawes, but when he was asked about the transformation, here's what he said, 'I owe it all to my wonderful wife, Catherine, who is buried outside the prison walls.'

Catherine was a young mother with three small children when her husband became the warden. Everybody warned her from the beginning that she should never set foot inside the prison walls, but that didn't stop Catherine. When the first prison basketball game was held, she walked into the gym with her three beautiful children and she sat in the stands with the inmates. Her attitude was, 'My husband and I are going to take care of these men. I don't have to worry.' She insisted on getting acquainted with them.

She discovered one convicted murderer was blind so she paid him a visit. Holding his hand, she said, 'Do you read braille?' 'What's braille?' he asked. So she taught him how to read using braille. She found a deaf-mute in the prison. She went to school to learn how to use sign language. Many said Catherine Lawes was the body of Jesus that came alive again in Sing Sing Prison from 1921 to 1937.

Then she was killed in a car accident. The next morning Lewis didn't come to work, so the acting warden took his place. It seemed that almost instantly the prison knew something was wrong. The following day, her body was resting in a casket in her home, two kilometres from the prison. As the acting warden took his early morning walk, he was shocked to see a large crowd of the toughest, hardest-looking criminals gathered at the main gate. He came closer and noted tears of grief. He knew how much they loved Catherine.

He turned and faced the men, 'Alright men, you can go. Just be sure you check back in this evening.' Then he opened the gate and a parade of criminals walked, without a guard, the two kilometres to stand in line to pay their final respects to Catherine Lawes, the woman who daily walked into hell to show the men a piece of heaven. And at the end of the day, every one of them checked back in. Every single one!

As I said before, love and service are inextricably entwined. You can't really have one without the other. The memorable exchange between Jesus and Peter is testament to this. And the other thing is, they are transformative. Catherine Lawes is testament to this.

I finish by reiterating a point we have made before, a point which cannot be made too often. In giving something of ourselves for the benefit of others, we bring on ourselves a sense of fulfilment and well-being. Research has shown that volunteering to serve others benefits both mental and physical well-being. Mahatma Gandhi said, *'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.'*

Dorothy Height, American human rights activist, said, *'Without service, we would not have a strong quality of life. It's important to the person who serves as well as the recipient. It's the way in which we ourselves grow and develop.'* I believe that really does say it all.