

3RD SUNDAY OF EASTER, C

TO LOVE IS TO SERVE

“Jesus said to Peter the third time: ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was upset that He asked him the third time ... he said, ‘Lord, You know everything: You know I love You.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed My sheep.’”

Jesus’ third Appearance: On this third Sunday of Easter, we reflect on the third appearance of Jesus to His disciples. He appeared to seven of them on the Sea of Tiberias, which is also the Sea of Galilee and the Lake of Gennesaret in Matthew and Luke’s gospels respectively. This sea, which is the lowest freshwater sea on earth and the second lowest lake on earth after the Dead Sea, was the centre of many important events in the ministry of Jesus. Here He called His first four disciples, who were two sets of brothers (Matt. 4: 18-21); He calmed the storm on this sea (Matt. 8: 23-27; Mk. 4: 35-41; Lk. 8: 22-25); He also walked on the surface of this sea (Mk. 6: 45-53; Jn. 6: 16-21) and invited Peter to walk up to Him (Matt 14: 22-23), just to mention a few. The Readings of this Sunday relate the themes of mercy and service.

Jesus Reveals the Merciful Face of God: In the gospel reading of last Sunday, Jesus appeared to the eleven for the first time after since they denied and abandoned Him on Holy Thursday. He chastised them not, nor made any reference to their betrayal of His love. Rather He breathed peace on them. Thomas, who was not present when He first appeared refused to believe the reports of the others, giving conditions if he must believe. The Lord returned eight days after to bring him from the darkness of his doubtful to the light of faith. Today, the Lord Jesus repeats similar action by appearing to the seven disciples who went fishing. This time, to save Peter, who had denied Him three times. Typically, Jesus does not make any reference to the Peter’s shameful past rather He seeks Peter confirmation of His love for Him: “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these others do?” Three times He asked Peter and three times Peter responded in the affirmative. Like in the case of Thomas, Jesus is restoring Peter, bringing him from his fears and discomforts to self-confidence. He is restoring him to that position He gave him when on the way to Caesarea Philippi, Peter professed Him: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” and He in turn said to Peter: “You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build My Church ...” (Matt. 16: 16-18) and gave him the keys of the kingdom. On this occasion, He made Peter the head of the apostolic college, the *Primus inter pares* (First among equals). Having denied the Master, Peter, by that same fact, lost that

position. Now Jesus comes to forgive and to restore, for when God forgives, He restores what was lost. Significantly, this restoration takes place by the same sea Peter was called (Matt. 4: 18-21), as if to infer a refresh of the old which might have been tainted by the denial; and by “the charcoal fire” where he stood, on the night he denied the Lord (Jn. 18: 17-18, 25-27), thus implying that what was denied has now been affirmed in similar circumstance. This is the same ways Jesus relates with us: He does not leave us in our desolateness. He does not allow our guilt to overwhelm us. He comes to seek us out, to show us His mercy, reconcile and restore us. Like Pope Francis says: “God never tires of forgiving us, we are the ones who are tired of going to Him for forgiveness.”

Service – Feed My Sheep: The readings also highlight the primacy of Peter. We already know that Jesus had made Peter the head of the Apostolic College when He called him Rock and gave him the keys of authority. The character of Peter dominates the Gospel of today: Peter is the first listed among the apostles, the others followed his lead to go fishing, he is the first to jump out to the shore to meet the Lord, he alone went aboard to drag the boat to the shore to provide the fish that was needed. These are innate leadership qualities of Peter in display. No doubt Jesus made him the lead. After breakfast, Peter is the only one Jesus addresses personally. This was a moment of affirmation of his love for his Master and commitment to service. Three times the Lord Jesus asked him: “Peter son of John, do you love me more than these?” He answered on all three occasions in the affirmative. Then Jesus committed him to action. For love without commitment is not love at all. St. John exhorts: “Dear children, let us not love in word and speech but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3: 18). Whereas some think that the threefold questioning was to cancel the threefold denial, it is more plausible to surmise that it rather pointed to the comprehensive pastoral role that Jesus gave to Peter. He was to “feed” and “shepherd” Jesus’ sheep. This was the duty that accompanies his love and role as the leader of the apostles. Peter will go on to carry out these tasks with utmost dedication and sacrifice, especially from the day of Pentecost through the missionary exploits and will pay the ultimate price for the love of the Master when he stretches out his hands to be nailed to the Roman cross and hoisted upside down to die for the faith he professed. This was in fulfilment of the words of the Lord: “I tell you solemnly, when you were young you put on your belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.” Each of

us is called to respond in this same selfless way to this salvific invitation by our Lord.

My dear friends, the threefold question of Jesus to Peter is also addressed to us today. Jesus is also asking each of us: “Do you love Me more than these?” Peter’s answer was firm and confident. What do we answer? Let this question address our hearts as we search our souls for a sincere answer. In what ways do we demonstrate this love? Beware not to let the indifference of the world to warp your focus nor quench the fire of your love. Let us, like Peter and the apostles, respond to the Lord’s invitation: “Follow Me” by rejecting all the pugnacious advances of the world and holding to the teachings of the Gospels. Let our actions testify to our love.