

3rd Sunday of Easter
Year C - 5/5/2019

Acts 9:1-6
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:6-14
John 21:1-19

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“Jesus said to Peter - ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” (John 21:15b). It’s an evocative interaction, isn’t it? This conversation between Jesus and Peter has been analysed critically by theologians over the centuries.

As a result, it been the constant source of speculation - about the three-fold asking of the question “do you love me”, compared to the three-fold denial of Peter. It picks up on the reference to the charcoal fire on which Jesus is baking the fish, and makes the comparison to the charcoal fire by which Peter was standing, warming his hands, as he denied Christ. And of course, in the Catholic tradition, this passage is held in the high esteem it is because of the reference to Christ that it is on Peter that he will build the church - the basis of the understanding of Papal supremacy.

But perhaps more importantly for us, it has also been seen as a way of understanding what it is that Christ desires of a Christian way of living. And it in that context that I want today to talk to you about a man named Henri Nouwen, and one of his seminal books, which is inspired by the Gospel reading we hear today.

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch-born Catholic priest, professor and writer, and by 1984 had reached the highest levels of success as a religious academic. He taught at the University of Notre Dame, and then Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools. But after twenty-five years in the priesthood, Nouwen recounts that as he was turning fifty he began to experience “a deep inner threat”.

He says, “I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term ‘burnout’ was a convenient psychological translation for spiritual death.”

He then made what he describes as the most important spiritual choice of his life. He left Harvard and moved to Toronto, where for the last eleven years of his life (1985-1996) he served as the residential priest at Daybreak, a home for people with severe physical and mental disabilities.

It was there, living among the weak, and (as he said) “suddenly faced with my naked self,” that Nouwen began to truly discover his “true identity” as a child loved by God: He wrote: “These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things – and forced me to claim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.”

That decisive break was provoked by John's gospel for this week, which in turn formed the basis of his small book, entitled “In the name of Jesus”. And it was this interaction between Peter and Jesus on which that book is based. As Nouwen himself discovered in the broken and wounded people of the Daybreak community, it became apparent to him that leadership in ministry was based on solidarity with the suffering people of the world, not on any grand schemes and plans.

After all, as Nouwen writes, “Jesus didn't ask Peter, his successor, “Who is going to take you seriously?” “What are your successes?” or “When will you deliver some results?” Instead, in the gospel account, Jesus asks not once but three times, “Do you love me?”.

Those words touched Peter, as they showed him who it was that Jesus was placing his trust in; whom Jesus had chosen to move forward in proclaiming the Gospel. Not some perfect specimen of faith and theology, but a flawed and broken person, who just earlier had denied that he even knew Christ; that had stated repeatedly “I do not know him.”

Although Nouwen’s book is ostensibly written for Christian leaders - Pastors, Ministers, Priests - there is much within it that speaks to us all. For we are all called to be ministers and agents of God’s word. That is part of the Easter reminder to us; that we all need to discover the empty tomb, and be prepared to proclaim boldly to the world the message of Christ crucified and risen - so that we are forgiven, loved, and free.

And we all need to see and understand ourselves as God’s created children - so that in all those times in our lives that we are tempted to find our identity and meaning and purpose in things of the world we might instead return to the sense of being loved by God - and in that, finding our identity instead.

As the antidote to seeking the approval of the world, Nouwen offers contemplative prayer - that discipline that sidelines all the urgent needs around us and takes us to that place where we hear that same voice that asked Peter also ask us ‘do you love me?’ and where we are reminded that we are loved - not because of any sense of relevance we may attain through what we do, but simply because we exist. This love, Nouwen says, should fuel us all in our walk of faith.

So that is the essence of prayer, for Henri Nouwen. Indeed, he writes elsewhere in the book that, “[t]o pray is to walk in the full light of God, and to say simply, without holding back, ‘I am human and you are God.’” Ultimately, it is not our agenda that matters. Ultimately it is not our agenda that matters. How hard is this notion for us to grasp in our lives, especially when we are constantly told by those supposedly in the know that you have to look after yourself or no one else will!

Peter is hurt by the repeated asking of the question by Jesus, “do you love me”. In truth, we are asked this question not just once, twice, or even three times, but repeatedly throughout our lives - every time we are faced with the opportunity to reach out to another in distress or pain; every time we have the chance to make someone else’s priorities take precedence over ours; and every time we hear the Spirit calling us to a deeper relationship with God, this is the question we hear asked - “do you love me?”

How will we answer this question when it is posed to us? How will we respond? You may think that it doesn’t really matter how you answer - “I am only one person”, you might say; “why does it matter to God if I answer yes or no”? Nouwen has an answer to that, too. He says this:

“The mystery of Christian discipleship is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the **gateway** for the unlimited and unconditional love of God...people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with God, they will find life and find it abundantly”

You see, it’s not just about us at all - by our love, we reach out in *God’s* love to the other - the one in need; the one who needs to hear this great message of mercy and grace. That’s what it means to feed God’s lambs, tend God’s sheep, and feed God’s sheep.

Jesus takes our hand, and asks “people of Walkerville, do you love me?”

How will we respond...

The Lord be with you.