

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2012 – A Sermon at Holy Cross Crediton**  
**John 21:1-19 and Acts 9: 1-6 – ‘Do you love me more than these?’**

In 1770 the Italian navigator Cassini said this, ‘It is better to have no idea where one is and to know it, than to confidently believe one is where one is not’. Anyone who has relied too heavily on a SatNav device and found themselves bewildered in a farmyard somewhere no doubt would agree with him.

But these are words that we could certainly apply to Saul - later to become Paul - the Apostle to the Gentiles, and the author of at least a third of the New Testament. As he heads down the Damascus road Saul thinks he’s got it all together - he is the right man, on the right road, on the right mission, zealously doing the will of God by destroying the sect known as ‘The Way’ who claim that Jesus of Nazareth is both Lord and Saviour. As he later confesses, this self-confident, self-righteous, self-willed Pharisee was **all wrong** when he thought he was **all right**. Everything changes when Saul encounters the risen Lord Jesus, and as he hits the dust of the Damascus road his whole world comes tumbling down with him. It’s a great story but the truth is that at some point something like this must become **our** story if we really seek to be people that follow the risen Lord Jesus Christ. As we will also see in a moment with Peter – God had to touch these self-confident and self-willed men before they could really become the people God wanted them to be and to thereby accomplish all that God wanted to do in and through their lives. Thomas Keating a Cistercian monk and author says that, ‘The path to spiritual progress consists in a series of necessary humiliations to our false self’. What he means is God invites us to live in the reality of a new life and identity in Christ, a life bigger and more expansive than we can imagine. Jesus called it ‘abiding in him, Paul speaks of being ‘in Christ’ or ‘living in the Spirit’. To know it we must surrender the little life that we can concoct ourselves by our own energies and our own efforts. It seems that so often it will be our failures and our suffering that God uses to convince us that we really can’t do it without God’s help and surrender is the only option. This is what is happening to Saul and to Peter in our readings today.

Richard Rohr, one of my favourite Christian writers said this, ‘God knows that all of us will fall somehow. Like good spiritual directors do, God must say after each failure of ours ‘Oh here is a great opportunity! Let’s see how we can work with this!’

In our Gospel today we are dealing with failure of the most painful and crushing sort – Peter has denied his Lord and in this encounter we see how Jesus lovingly restores him. In both our readings we witness how God deals with Saul and Peter’s self-confidence and self-sufficiency and how he turns that into a confidence and a dependence in the grace and love that God freely gives. So what do you do when life is confusing and overwhelming and you just need to clear your head? I expect some people go out into the garden and do a bit of digging and pottering, others perhaps take the dog for a walk - if you have one. There’s something about being outside in the open that helps at times like that. For Peter in our gospel reading today his response is to go fishing. To go back to a world he knows and understands, to be on the lake again, after a time of personal failure, turmoil and confusion. He is joined by six of the other disciples and they set off for a night’s fishing only to catch absolutely nothing.

I’m not sure if Peter - and maybe the other disciples too - were running away when they went fishing, but the good news is Jesus met them right there on the beach! There are no words of condemnation, no rebuke - just breakfast. Whether it’s the disciples on the beach or Saul on the Damascus road – the Risen Christ meets them where they are and starts to change their world. The good news is that God meets us **as** we are - **where** we are - with no need to smarten up our act. The miraculous catch of fish must have been an immediate reminder to Peter of that first time he met Jesus and in obedience to his word he caught that first miraculous catch of fish and here it was happening all over again – it’s like a new beginning.

Sitting around that fire must have been a very awkward time for Peter because only a short while previously he had sat around another fire in the courtyard of the High Priest’s house and there he had denied Jesus. I think that was deliberate in that the Lord has set up a scene that will remind Peter of his denial because Jesus wants to thoroughly heal him of the pain and sting of it so that he can move on in his relationship with him. This is not just a restoration of Peter to a job as chief apostle this is about the restoration of Peter as a much loved person.

Now as you’ll know by now I am not one to quote Greek in my sermons as a general rule, but on this occasion it is a great help to know the Greek in this passage because Jesus asks Peter three questions and the Greek word used for love changes during their conversation. These three questions of Jesus mirror the three denials of Peter; in the first question Jesus asks, ‘Simon, son of John do you *agape* me more than these?’ - *agape* is the Greek word for divine God-like love. Peter must have been reminded of his words recorded by Mark at the last supper, ‘Even if all become

deserters, I will not.' And, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you'. He is claiming to have agape love and a love greater than all the other disciples possessed. This time Peter replies, 'Yes Lord you know that I *phileo* you. *Phileo* means a love between friends. Peter is not claiming agape love now, he knows he is not capable of it – he knows who is and has been humbled with his self-confidence and self assurance broken. With this answer Jesus gives him a commission 'Feed my lambs'. Again Jesus asks Simon do you 'agape' me and Peter's reply is the same Lord I 'phileo' you. Peter refuses to claim more than he can give even under divine scrutiny. Again another commission follows, 'Tend my sheep'. And finally Jesus asks, 'Simon son of John do you phileo me?' Jesus is now using the same word for love as Peter- in other words he is asking if even the love Peter claims to have now the love of a friend is as strong as he says it is, and although upset Peter says Lord you know everything. Jesus knows exactly how much Peter loves him he just wants to know that Peter knows. From now on Peter's confidence will be in Jesus' evaluation of him not his own.

As their conversation closes Jesus prophesies about Peter's future and says, '...when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go'. Here Jesus displays his knowledge that Peter is a changed man a man who is moving from wilfulness to willingness. We look back at his previous declarations– 'I will not desert you'... 'I will die with you'... I will, I will; all that is now past and he will increasingly become a humble realistic man. Finally as a man surrendered to God he ultimately demonstrates agape love at the end of his life as he is martyred for his Lord under the Emperor Nero Augustus Caesar. Tradition saying he was crucified upside down at his own request. We see the same picture emerge with Saul; here the man who made violent threats to the early Christians is humbled and this temporarily blinded man is lead by the hand into the city much like a child. Both men becoming now not wilful, but willing, and in God's hands are transformed into the great apostles we know and trust of the early church. In God's kingdom the falling becomes the standing. The stumbling becomes the finding. The dying becomes the rising. Amen.