

Third Sunday of Easter C - Life's Charcoal Fires

May 4, 2025

Last Sunday we found encouragement in the fact that it was not easy for the apostles to grasp the difference the Lord's Resurrection should make in their lives. This Sunday's gospel reading from John tells us of the conversion that brought this difference in Peter, destined to become the fearless leader of the Twelve. According to this account, the disciples have already been in the presence of the Risen Lord more than once; but, still uncertain what is required of them, they are going back to their old life of fishing again. Most are slow to recognize Jesus on the shore of the lake; it is the disciple whom Jesus loves that is the first to do so. And even when they have joined him they hesitate to ask him. The apostles still need time to be converted.

It is Peter especially who must be converted, if he is to be their leader, when with him they come to know that they are called to be 'fishers of men – 'with the Lord at their side. Peter is confronted with his threefold denial as Jesus asks him three times, 'Do you love me?'. Jesus knows exactly how he felt and offered him an opportunity to proclaim his love and loyalty to the risen Christ. Peter's authority, lost by his denial, is now restored through his confession of faith, love and loyalty. His position as head of the apostles is clarified and he is given the commission to guard the whole flock in Christ's name, a role that will lead to a violent death.

We see how well this new trust in the Risen Lord sustains Peter as he faces the Sanhedrin, the very body in the presence of which he had felt intimidated when he betrayed his Master. Unafraid of them now, he has 'filled Jerusalem 'with his teaching (First reading Acts 5). Now he sees his life, shaped by the Lord's call, as 'obedience to God – 'whatever it may cost. He gives his fearless witness to the God of Israel as the one who raised Jesus to be 'leader and saviour – 'confident that he is supported by 'the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him'; and he calls those who unjustly put Jesus to death to 'repentance so they might receive the forgiveness of sins'. Now the lessons of the Risen Lord, given on the evening of his resurrection day, have become the charter of his life. An encouraging memory for each of us in our Easter reflections, as we seek to respond to the call of the Risen Lord in the confusion of our lives. In a trusting acknowledgment of our weakness we shall find our true strength.

The Gospel of John this Sunday presents us with the redemption of the apostle Peter. It occurred on a beach next to a "charcoal fire" (John 21:9). Life presented Peter with two very different charcoal fires. When Jesus was arrested, Peter failed our Lord by running away from the Garden of Gethsemane. After he recovered his senses, Peter snuck back as close as he dared to where Our Lord was being held. He got close enough to a fire, a charcoal fire (John 18:18), where three times he denied knowing Jesus. Then we read today that Jesus made a charcoal fire on the beach. Jesus wanted Peter to have the opportunity to recover and receive God's grace. There, at the charcoal fire, Our Lord asked Peter three times if he loved him. This time, rather than three times denying Jesus, Peter three times affirmed his love for Our Lord. Our Good Shepherd leaves his church in the charge of a man who has failed, which shows that Christ's call does not exclude falls. Peter came to know God's grace through failure. His confidence was restored and he gained the strength to renew his faith and throw himself into the spreading of the gospel. For us, there are also two charcoal fires in life. The first charcoal fire symbolizes all the times we have sinned, all the times we have chosen the darkness over the light and the sadness and guilt we experience because of our sins. The second charcoal fire symbolizes the place where we have received mercy, the place of our conversion and the place where we have understood God's unconditional love. Often failure can be the finger of God pointing the way, awakening within us an awareness of our own helplessness, seeking God's mercy to give us strength, to plunge into the waters of life and risk everything to carry out the mission God has planned for us, to love our Lord at all costs.

Peter hauls ashore the large net of 153 fish. Many have wondered what symbolism, if any, there is in the exact number of fish. The Church fathers seem to indicate that they represent the peoples and races of the world. St. Jerome proposed that the number 153 represents the totality of the Gentiles who would be saved through Christ. He saw the miraculous catch as a symbol of the Church's mission to gather all nations into the fold of Christ. St.

Gregory the Great interpreted the 153 fish as a sign of the Church's unity and the diversity of its members. He believed that just as the net held all the fish together, the Church unites people from all walks of life under the banner of Christ. Whatever the number symbolizes, we know the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will gather into one unbroken net, men and women, rich or poor of every race, colour and nationality to extend God's kingdom everywhere. We are to bear effective witness, to go out and preach in his name to a world that does not always want to hear the truth. This requires courage because it is never easy to do what is right when it means we have to go against the popular values. Our life is meant to be one of living service for the glory of God in whatever capacity we are as long as we can find some role where we can be helpful to others, whether it be modest, spectacular, important or insignificant. Every day we are presented with opportunities to help the elderly, to listen to bereaved neighbours, to give companionship to the lonely, the isolated, the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, the little children, provided we are willing to take the time. Jesus allowed Peter to receive the core belief that **God is love**, and Peter is loved by God unconditionally. Pope Francis (Peter's "descendent"), when he was recuperating at the Gemelli Polyclinic recently, addressed his dear brothers in the diaconate by praising the deacons for their dedication to carrying out their ministry in the Church with words and deeds, bringing God's love and mercy to all. In this spirit, the Pope urged them to continue with joy and love. "Do not be afraid to risk love!" he said. "I urge you to continue with joy your apostolate and – to be a sign of a love that embraces all..."

What is my core belief? Would I be a sign of God's love that embraces all in our world today?