

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

3 of Easter C

5th May 2019

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Acts 9.1-20

Part of Psalm 30

John 21.1-19

Forgiveness and Calling

Isn't it great when we have two really strong stories for our Bible readings? No complicated theology here - just stories that we know and love about people with big personalities, who we think we've got a feel for - Peter and Paul (or Simon and Saul, as they were to start with). I guess most of us have heard these stories hundreds of times - or if not hundreds, at least tens of times, - and it may be that we reckon we know what they're all about: forgiveness, a new start, those two very different men both being commissioned to serve the Good News of Jesus, each in their different way. Saul - to bring Christ's name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel, and Peter - to feed and tend Christ's lambs, his sheep, his flock, his church.

But let's just refresh our memory of some of the details of these stories, by setting them alongside each other, and seeing what they've got in common, and to what extent they differ.

First they both begin with a burden of sin or guilt or shame that these men carried being brought to mind in some searching words addressed to them by the Risen Jesus.

Saul didn't know he was guilty; he was apparently very pleased with himself; he'd been helping to put down a new heresy, and upholding the standards of his ancestors' religion - and now, here he was, on his way to root out troublemakers from the Jewish community in Damascus: the infection had spread there from Jerusalem, and he'd got the job of making sure the cure - a radical cure - reached Damascus from Jerusalem, too. He was going to arrest followers of 'the Way' - (that is, followers of Jesus the 'false Messiah'), and send them off in chains to be dealt with by the priestly Council in Jerusalem. That would put a stop to the problem going any further!

Yes, Saul was convinced that what he was doing the right thing - until the moment he was blinded by unaccustomed light and knocked off his horse by the shock of it. And suddenly a voice strangely asked him, '*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*' And then, to make the meaning clearer, '*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*' (Acts 9.4 and 5). Suddenly, Saul couldn't see himself any more as the virtuous defender of true godliness: he was guilty man. His world, his image of himself, was falling apart.

Simon Peter, on the other hand, had probably been living with a burden of guilt and shame for some time – ever since that dreadful moment when he'd realised that he'd denied knowing Jesus three times (just as Jesus had said he would); he'd let his adored Master down; he'd let himself down – he, the man who'd been so sure he would lay down his life for Jesus if he had to. He'd plumbed the depths of despair about himself when he stumbled out of the High Priest's courtyard, and probably found a dark corner somewhere to hide in, because he was weeping bitterly (Mark 14.72).

I don't know how it is with you when you feel guilty or ashamed, but if you're like me, you're a bit paralysed for a while, but eventually decide you just have to get on with things, and probably you try to keep busy and cover up whatever it is you've done wrong, both from other people and, so far as possible, from your own conscious mind.. And probably you dread, absolutely dread, anyone mentioning or alluding to the thing you feel so guilty about. But, at the same time, you're crying out inside for someone to help you get the burden off your chest, - off your back - off your conscience... What tenterhooks Simon Peter must have been on, when he met the Risen Jesus, and realised it was the very Master he'd let down; what relief – in a way – he must have felt, when the Lord didn't say anything about it, or not at firstbut then... ah! then, the dreaded moment came: he took Peter aside,

and without mentioning the denial, he probed in a way which unmistakably referred to it, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?... do you love me?...do you *really* love me as a friend?' (Simon Peter, you see, had qualified his replies about loving Jesus – each time he'd said he loved him '*as a friend*' – and the third time Jesus asked, he'd come down to Peter's level, and asked him did he really love him 'as a friend'. It's not obvious from the English translations we read, but it's all there, very clearly in the Greek the Gospel's written in.) So, little wonder if Peter felt hurt and exposed. Could Jesus no longer trust him 'as a friend'? This must have been what he'd feared most after his denial – what kind of friend that denied knowing you when the chips were down?

Of course, from our point of view, Peter's guilt might not have seemed so great: after all, unlike the rest of the Eleven, he hadn't run away from Jesus as soon as he was arrested in the Garden: he'd been brave enough to follow him, all the way into the High Priest's house and hang around there for hours to see what would happen. That must have been terrifying. But in the course of that, his courage faltered and broken – three times. We can understand this all too well, and if we'd been there we might have wanted to tell Peter that he should minimise his guilt. We couldn't have done as well as he did, in appalling circumstances, we'd say. But rational advice like this doesn't touch the heart of the matter for someone whose conscience is really

hurting; only the surgeon's knife can cut out the damage and make room for new growth. So – our Lord probed where it hurt most – but he was doing it from mercy, not for punishment.

And so it was for Saul – there was mercy in the revealing of his sin. And we see that mercy at work in the helping hands of his companions who led him carefully into Damascus, and made sure he was safely bestowed in the friendly house of a man named Judas on Straight Street. And it was the mercy of the Lord which sent to him the man named Ananias, a gentle soul, who would call Saul 'brother', tell him the meaning of his experience, and baptise him.

But first there was the process, for Saul, of coming to terms with the complete upending of his life. Nowadays we use the word 'process' as a verb, and sometimes use it to describe coming to terms, gradually and with difficulty, with some new truth or experience. Could it be that Saul's temporary blindness was in some sense a symptom of his shock – the shock which also made him refuse food and drink for three days? He needed time to 'process' what had happened to him, and only when Ananias came were the last pieces able to slot into his mental jigsaw, and full awareness came that it was Love which he had met by the way, and not condemnation, Love, which was able to overcome the darkness of his fear and doubt.

For Simon Peter, too, there was time given to process what was being said to him. The threefold questioning didn't only allude to his threefold denial – it gave time, too, for him to notice and absorb the command to feed and tend Christ's flock. Such an expression of confidence, and such a turning round of Peter's own failure -it must have taken times to come to terms with. St John tells us that in the Upper Room Peter had boldly said that he would '*lay down his life*' for Jesus (John 13.37) – echoing the very same phrase that Jesus had used of himself: '*the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep*' (John 10.11). So Peter's rash offer was retrieved, as he was called to be an under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd himself. '*Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep*' (John 20.15,, 17). One day, Peter would lay down his life for the flock and for its Lord, under Nero's persecution, and in so doing, he would '*follow*' his Master in the profoundest way. But for now, he had a mission to feed and to tend.

Last week's Gospel reading about Jesus' appearance in the Upper Room, gave his followers the mission of forgiving sins – that is, setting others free. Now, to this is added the mission to feed and tend all whom the Lord calls his own. And these are our callings, too – to set people with burdened consciences free, to feed and tend both young and old, in every sense of those words 'feeding' and 'tending'. And these missions are inseparable from the one set out for Saul – bringing Christ's name to all people in all places. For this is the

best way of feeding, the best way of tending, the most complete way of setting free and bringing the forgiveness which has been brought to us.

Indeed, it's only as those who have processed and taken to heart the forgiveness that the Lord has given us, and the extraordinary confidence that he places in us, that we can effectively feed and tend the world and speak to it of Christ. If we try to do these things with a sense of unresolved guilt – perhaps throwing all our efforts into what we think is Christian service, but is really a kind of bargaining with a God whom we fear, a God we think can't really love us – then we're not serving in freedom, and what we do is hardly likely to set other people free (except that the grace of God sometimes wonderfully override our failures in understanding). But the Lord does want us, like Paul and Peter, to minister to others from a much better place than unresolved guilt. And so, he gives us these stories of Saul and Simon, Paul and Peter, so that we may find ourselves in them.

But, like Paul and Peter, we will need to realise that forgiveness and freedom, service and love, don't exempt us from the path of suffering. Even as Ananias ministered to Saul, he had to reveal to him how much suffering he would have to endure for the sake of Jesus' name (Acts 9.16). And Peter had prophesied to him something of his own future helplessness and death. Probably for us our suffering won't be so much

as they went through, although as is becoming clear, for all too many of our Christian brothers and sisters in the world, severe suffering and persecution are very close at hand. Who are we to think that our faith will bring us none?

But the last word is always one of love and closeness to our Lord: it is the privilege of knowing that he doesn't give up on us, and says to you and says to me, *'Follow me.'* (John 21.19)