



Bristol Cathedral

Sermon Preached at the Cathedral Eucharist 12th May 2013

By the Dean

Do you love me? (John 21:1-22)

A few years ago now I preached for an ordination service at St Paul's Cathedral. It was an extraordinary experience, the pulpit is big enough to play a game of squash, the west end of the cathedral is so far away it fades out of focus. I talked to the ordinands about Henry Parry Liddon. Afterwards, the Bishop of London sought me out and boomed at me, 'Liddon, splendid, I have an affection for Liddon'. Round a corner lurked the then Dean who hissed at me 'Liddon, I have always thought Liddon was over-rated'. You have probably never heard of Liddon, but let me tell you about him so that you can make your own judgement. In the 1870s they said Liddon was the greatest preacher in the Church of England. He had been Vice Principal of a theological college, my theological college at Cuddesdon and he took a particular interest in the formation of the clergy. In 1874 he preached in St Paul's Cathedral, at an ordination service. He told the congregation about the day the followers of John the Baptist came to find Jesus. John the Baptist had been murdered, he could give his followers no more help, but as they looked at Christ they realised that John had told them the truth about him. They said this, 'John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true'. Liddon repeated that phrase, 'John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true'. Then, he turned to the young men sitting in their surplices waiting to be ordained. He told them they had to ask themselves a question, not the sort of question you and I might ask, but a very Victorian question:

What shall I desire to have done when I come to die?

What, he asked will be the achievement you should be judged by? He told them the sort of things to which a Curate can look forward: new responsibilities and spheres of influence, the making and losing of friends, great sorrows, great joys marriage perhaps, promotion even. Then he told them that none of it mattered. They should have one ambition, they should hope that when their ministry was over men and women would say of them what once they said of John the Baptist

John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true

I think that might be what we should expect not just of our clergy, but of one another, I think it might come quite close to being a description of being a Christian, that, in our words and actions we tell the truth about Christ. So substitute your own name;

Helen did no miracle: but all things that Helen spake of this man were true'

Keep that in mind we will come back to it. We need to turn to that gospel reading we heard, Peter and Christ at the lakeside. Notice first, that we are back in Galilee. Now that is odd. Peter has been a witness to the resurrection; he has stood in the empty tomb. Yet here he is back on the Lake, living the old life, not risen at all, but fallen. And Christ is standing by a charcoal fire, that's an interesting detail. We have stood at a charcoal fire before, in the courtyard of the high priest's house, where Peter stood warming his hands and denied Christ three times. Not risen, but fallen.

Peter has been fishing and has caught nothing. He has failed and comes to Christ empty handed. Not risen, but fallen. They have been fishing at night, in the dark but now it is morning and light has dawned. Peter who

last saw Christ in the dark and denied him now staggers into the light. Not risen, but fallen.

We are left in no doubt. Peter comes to Christ as a man in need of forgiveness. He is taken on one side and asked three times 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' The first question is pointed. 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' The word Jesus uses for love is *agapas*, it's the word for committed, selfless love. So, the question is, 'Simon, son of John do you love me utterly, as I love you, and do you love more than these?' Peter ducks the question. He knows he cannot claim to love Christ more than the other disciples, knows that that he has never loved as Christ loves. So, Peter uses another word, *philo*. He says, 'Lord you know that I am your friend' Jesus replies to him 'Feed my lambs'.

That instruction comes as a bit of a surprise. Peter is a fisherman remember. Now the job description changes, he is to be a shepherd. But Peter would have understood. After all, he would remember Jesus saying 'I am the good shepherd.' He would remember too all those references to sheep and shepherds in the ancient scriptures. In Psalm Twenty-Three, the Lord himself is the shepherd. Abraham had flocks, Moses was a shepherd when he came to the burning bush, and David was a shepherd who became a King. This is Peter's great commission. Told to 'feed my lambs', he is to lead the sheep of God into the kingdom like Moses, rule them like David, be their father like Abraham. Above all he is to be a shepherd as Christ was shepherd, he is to live Christ's life. And, notice, he is to do it gently, he is not told to *lead* the sheep, he is told to *feed* them. This is the staggering vocation laid before Peter. Peter is to be like Christ.

Jesus has not finished. He asks a second time. 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter is not going to be allowed to forget that whatever it is he is going to do, however, challenging, however important, it begins with what he thinks about Christ. Whatever the future holds it is Christ who commands Peter's attention. 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' *Agapas* again. Do you love me *utterly*?

Then again, a third time, and now strikingly Jesus uses, *philo*, the word Simon himself had used. 'Simon, son of John, are you my friend?' Three questions and And three commands: 'Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep'. Three times Jesus spoke to Peter more formally than he was used to, not 'Simon', but the much more official 'Simon, bar Jona', 'Simon son of John'. And Peter was grieved. 'Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'do you love me?'

Of course he was grieved. He knew what was being said and done with these three questions. The memories all came back to him. Jesus prodded at his memory by using words he had used to him before 'Truly, truly, I say to you...' That was exactly the way in which Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny him three times'. No wonder that now Peter was anguished. Three denials, and now three acts of commitment. At the Lakeside, from which he had been called long ago, near the fire, empty handed in the penetrating light of day, Peter knows he is not risen but fallen.

And this is the rock on which Christ builds his church

Christ builds his church on Peter. Peter fell and rose again. The church is the community of people who fall and rise. This matters, it really matters, we are called to be the people that know the difference between fall and resurrection. We are not here because we are good, we are not here because we are faultless. We are here as those who fail and stand like Peter empty-handed and ashamed. We need to be forgiven and we know it. We need to be forgiven and forgiveness is given.

Like Peter we are forgiven and like Peter what is asked of us is that we fix our eyes on Christ and know that we are called to follow him. We began with a dead priest, Henry Parry Liddon, who told ordinands that they must tell the truth about Christ. We met the apostle who had his eyes fixed only on Christ and we heard that we are all disciples and fall and rise. The point is simple, all of us fall, all of us can be forgiven and rise again. All of us are called to live not our lives, but Christ's. That is the good news. All the rest is commentary.

We leave here this morning not to become more and more ourselves, but more and more Christ like. Falling and rising, again and again, we know our limits. We will do no miracle. We will endeavour to tell the truth about Christ

John did no miracle, but all things that John spake of this man were true

And the truth we will tell is that the life of Christ is love. Our truth will be a life of love, and not *philo* but *agapas*