

**FEED MY SHEEP**  
or  
**LIVING TO CARE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD**

Acts 9. 1-20  
Revelation 5. 11-14  
John 21. 1-19

*Introduction*

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I thought that I would start my talk by sharing four new and creative answering machine messages that you might want to put on your answering machine at home.

Message n° 1: ‘Hi! Fr. John’s answering machine is broken. This is his fridge. Please speak very slowly, and I’ll stick your message to myself with one of these magnets.’

Message n° 2: ‘This is not an answering machine, this is a telepathic thought-recording device. After the tone, *think* about your name, your reason for calling, and a number where I can reach you, and I will *think* about returning your call.’

Message n° 3: ‘Greetings, you have reached the Sixth Sense Detective Agency. We know *who you are* and *what you want*, so at the sound of the tone, please hang up.’

Message n°4: ‘Hi. I am probably home. I’m just avoiding someone I don’t like. Leave me a message, and if I don’t call back, it’s you.’

As we consider the latter part of the gospel text appointed for today, we are led to think about what it means to ‘feed Christ’s sheep’ and to ‘live to care’ in the Church of God. I’m afraid that when many of us hear that Christians should actively care for other people, our first temptation may be to react like the person who composed

that last answering machine message! We want to avoid the subject entirely; and we want to do so for a number of reasons. First of all, there are so many people who need caring of some sort. We fear that we will never be able to adequately meet the needs of everyone, and that it's impossible to make a real difference. Or we remember those times when we have tried to help someone, and it hasn't worked out as we hoped or wanted. Or still again, we may avoid the subject of caring for others, because we think that we're not wired that way; we think that we're not good at it, and that it's not our natural or spiritual gifting.

The word 'care' can mean many things. It can mean to 'attend to'; to 'look after'; to 'nurse'; to 'wait on'; to 'comfort'; to 'aid'; and to 'support'. The Christian walk is a shared journey. Throughout the New Testament, and particularly in St Paul's epistles to the young Christian Church, we see that Christians are called to relate to, and to depend upon one another. They are to carry each other's burdens (Gal 6. 2); they are to suffer and to rejoice together (1 Cor 12. 26); the strong are to bear the failings of the weak (Rom 15. 1). The new life to which Christ has called us is a *shared life*.

The Greek word used to describe the shared life of the people of God was *koinonia*. Our best word for it in English is 'fellowship', but the English word is far too limited to encompass the meaning of it. *Koinonia* means sharing in all kinds of ways: sharing in friendship (Acts 2. 42); being partners in the gospel (Ph 1. 5); sharing material possessions (2 Cor 8. 4); having fellowship in Christ (1 Cor 1. 9); and sharing life together in the Spirit (2 Cor 13. 14). Above all, *koinonia* refers to our shared fellowship with God. As St John wrote in one of his letters, 'we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ' (1 Jn 1. 3). Because we belong to Christ, we belong to each other. In *koinonia*, we are bound to each other; to Christ; and to God.

At the heart of the shared life of the people of God is the ministry of spiritual support, guidance and restoration. In that ministry, we start by accepting and affirming strength in others. In our shared life together, we affirm that we are all forgiven and accepted by God; that we are all children of God and heirs of the kingdom; and that we have been made new people in Christ. As Christians who have a shared life together, we encourage others to be strong *in* God, to be strong *under* God, and to be strong *with* God.

In the shared life of the people of God, we not only accept and affirm strength; we also accept and minister to weakness. When a member of God's church slips or takes a false step, we provide mutual support and correction to that person; and we restore him or her with a spirit of gentleness, which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Our supporting, guiding and restoring activity is in the Spirit of Christ. And this supporting, guiding and restoring activity finds further expression in our carrying of each other's burdens.<sup>1</sup>

One person who was ministered to in his weakness and who benefited from a perfect model of supporting, guiding and restoring ministry was Simon Peter.

When we meet Simon Peter in John 21, he has just been fishing in the Sea of Tiberias<sup>2</sup> with some of the other disciples. That night, as they have been fishing, they have caught nothing; and early in the morning, our Lord makes his third post-resurrection to his disciples. He stands on the shore and calls out to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' When they reply in the negative, Jesus shows them where to cast the net so that an impressive number of fish is caught.<sup>3</sup> Simon Peter realises that it is Christ who is on the shore, and that it is our Lord who has given them the

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<sup>1</sup> As we do this, we fulfil the law of Christ, which is simply a reference to the Mosaic Law as interpreted and as lived by Jesus. It is the Mosaic Law exemplified by Jesus' life of self-giving love on behalf of others (cf. Gal 1. 4, 2. 20).

<sup>2</sup> Also known as the Sea of Galilee.

<sup>3</sup> In the fourth century, St Jerome commented that there was a tradition in his day that in all the seas of the world, there were exactly 153 fish.

instructions to fish.<sup>4</sup> In his eagerness, he jumps out of the boat and goes to meet Jesus. As Simon Peter arrives on the beach, he sees that Christ has prepared a fire of burning coals; fish is cooking; and there is some bread. Our Lord invites the disciples to come and have breakfast.

Standing there in front of Jesus, Simon Peter is in a real state. The last time that he had stood near a coal fire was on the night of Christ's arrest, when he had denied him three times. And as Simon Peter stands with our Lord next to the coal fire on the beach, Jesus looks him squarely in the eye and asks him three times, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?'<sup>5</sup> Simon Peter is upset that Christ asks him the question three times, and answers each time that yes, indeed, he does love his Lord; to which Jesus simply replies, 'Feed my lambs'. 'Tend my sheep'. He charges Peter with the personal care of his flock.

It is easy to see what our Lord is doing. He is *loving and forgiving* Peter and giving him a chance to profess *his love for him* three times, in order to make up for his earlier three-fold denial. But not only does Jesus love and forgive Peter; he gives him a new commission and a new direction. He sends Peter out to build the Church of God and to care for it. And Peter is empowered to accomplish this task because he has experienced the amazing love and forgiveness of Christ; he has received his support, guidance and restoration. Our Lord's ministry to Simon Peter, and Simon Peter's way of receiving that ministry, are wonderful models of pastoral care for the Church of God today.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Mk 1. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Much has been made of the verbs used for "to love" in this exchange. Some scholars point out that the first two times, Jesus uses the Greek word *agape* and Peter's reply uses the word *phileo*. The third time, both Jesus and Peter use the word *phileo*. The conclusion that is often drawn is that Jesus is asking for a more noble love, while Peter offers simple friendship as all that he can give; and ultimately Jesus accepts this lower form of love. But it is likely that Jesus was speaking in Aramaic or Hebrew, rather than Greek. Like English, Hebrew and Aramaic only have one word for love; they do not have the three subtle differences of the Greek language.

Having observed this wonderful model of pastoral care, we now see that our propensity to love and to reach out to others in caring ministry is a direct function of our *own experience* of the love of God. It is a direct function of our knowing, deep down in the core of our being, that we are beloved of God.

The words of the God the Father to Jesus on the day of his baptism are his words for all of us: ‘You are my son; you are my daughter; and with you I am well pleased’ (Lk 3. 21-22). In each of us, there is an inner voice of Love that says, ‘*You* are the Beloved of God!’ In each of us, there is an inner voice of Love that says, ‘*You* are my Beloved son or daughter, and on *you* my favour rests!’ It is the Beloved of God in the Church of God who are called to live to care. As we allow the truth of our Beloved-ness to become enfleshed in everything we think, say and do, we will find that we are *motivated*; we will find that we are *empowered*; we will find that we are *freed* to live to care.

May each of us hear afresh that inner voice of God’s love today. It is far better than any answering machine message we will ever encounter.

Amen.