

AMBIVALENT DISCIPLES

Acts 9. 1-6

Revelation 5. 11-14

John 21. 1-19

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

I'd like to start my talk by asking you a question. Are you the type of person who can make quick decisions? Some people are able to make decisions without being bogged down by uncertainty. They make them with minimal amounts of anxiety and do not fret over whether or not they made the wrong choice in the first place. For other people, everyday decisions, small or large, can cause angst and worry. Their ability to make any decision is stopped dead in its tracks by ambivalence. 'Ambivalence' is what we experience when we have two opposing feelings simultaneously toward an individual, object or situation. All of us experience ambivalent feelings at some time or another, but chronic ambivalent thinking leads to avoidance, procrastination and prevents us from reaching our full potential.

Our appointed gospel passage for this Sunday provides us with an opportunity to look closely at the decision-making abilities of a very significant disciple, Simon Peter. You will remember that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it was Peter who declared that our Lord was 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.¹ And it was at that critical moment of confessional faith, the man who had been named 'Simon son of Jonah (or John)' was renamed 'Peter', meaning 'rock'; and on that rock, Jesus said, 'I will build my Church'.²

In that confession, Peter affirms Christ as the one who has come to save; but in today's reading from St John's gospel, Peter does something else: he affirms his love

¹ Cf. Mt 16. 16; Mk 8. 29; Lk 9. 20.

² Cf. Mt 16. 18.

for our Lord. Not just his obedience; not just his deference; but his love. ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord.’ ‘Feed my lambs.’ ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ ‘Yes, Lord.’ ‘Tend my sheep.’ Three times. And then Jesus says to Peter, ‘Follow me.’

Peter is, in many ways, the model of one important kind of Christian discipleship and he has been recognised as such by Christian tradition. He is the disciple who received the keys to the kingdom; he is the one who was present with Christ at many of the most critical moments in our Lord’s ministry; he is the one who was tasked with shepherding the Church in its earliest, most formative and dangerous days.

At the same time, however, there is also a sense in which Peter is an ambivalent disciple. ‘Ambivalent’ in the literal sense: not indifferent or lazily indecisive, but a person who is torn between two competing interests, two conflicting impulses.

As chapter 21 of John’s gospel opens, the disciples have already seen Jesus arrested and crucified and, according to John, Christ has appeared to the disciples at least once before. This time, when we hear the exchange between Peter and our Lord, they are standing on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, along with six other disciples, eating a meal of fish cooked over a charcoal fire.

I wonder if you can imagine yourself alongside the disciples there on that shore; and if you can put yourself in blessed St Peter’s shoes. If he was wearing shoes, that is; (he might not have been). Those seven disciples were standing on the shore with Jesus because he had appeared there while they were out on a boat: fishermen trying to catch fish. They had set out the night before, but had not caught anything. Then early that morning, a man had appeared on the shore, perhaps one hundred meters away, and instructed them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They did so, and immediately caught so many fish that they almost broke the net.

It was not Peter, but a man referred to as ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ who recognised Christ. ‘It is the Lord!’ he shouted, at which time Peter jumped off the boat and into the water, and swam to shore. So if he was wearing shoes, they were sopping wet.

This diving off the boat was the enthusiastic response of a dedicated disciple; but as he stood there wet and perhaps cold, both Peter and our Lord must have been aware that Peter had not recognised Jesus when he stood on the shore. Peter had not recognised the one who had given him the keys to the kingdom; Peter had not recognised the man he had identified as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Was Peter embarrassed by this? Ashamed? Ashamed because this greatest of the apostles required someone else, someone unnamed in the text, to point out to him the presence of their Lord?

This is the Peter who stands there, probably anxiously, with Christ. The prophecy of John the Baptist was again affirmed: ‘Among you stands one whom you do not know’ he had said long ago,³ in some of the first words about our Lord spoken in the gospel of John. Here Jesus was, again, coming to his own; and his own, those closest to him, knew him not; they were unable to recognise his resurrected body.

As they ate the fish that Christ had miraculously provided, perhaps Peter was also remembering the feeding of the five thousand, a miracle that also happened by the Sea of Tiberias (or Galilee), where they were now. Our Lord had done all that from five loaves and two fish. By contrast, Peter had just spent all night casting his nets on the water and hadn’t been able to catch a single fish. They had bread with their breakfast, too, also supplied by Jesus. Perhaps Peter was remembering that other time in which Christ supplied bread. At the Last Supper, our Lord had shared a meal with the disciples; he had washed their feet; he had given them the ‘New

³ Cf. Jn 1. 26.

Commandment' that they love another; he had predicted his betrayal; and, more pointedly, he had predicted Peter's denial of his knowledge of the Christ.

Jesus handed Peter the fish, fish Peter couldn't supply on his own, fish cooked over a charcoal fire; a setting that must have looked not unlike the charcoal fire⁴ beside which Peter had been standing in the courtyard when he denied Christ. Standing next to that charcoal fire only a few days before, Peter had said three times that he didn't know the Lord. And there they are again; and Jesus asks him, three times, if he loves him.

Imagine them there, Peter and Christ, reliving this series of moments in their relationship. It is a poignant reminder of (shall we say) some 'unfinished business'. You have to wonder if Peter's face didn't burn with embarrassment, and perhaps shame, as the Lord he had *not* recognised handed him fish he could *not* catch with hands bearing the scars of the nails of crucifixion, inflicted on him just after Peter, 'the rock', had abandoned him.

Peter is, in many ways, the model of one important kind of Christian discipleship and in today's reading we hear him affirm not only his obedience, but also his love of Jesus. At the same time, we also see that Peter is an ambivalent disciple, torn between that love for Christ and a self-centeredness that blinds him to our Lord's presence. Peter is torn between his dedication to apostleship and his fear for his own safety. He is a saint, perhaps one of the greatest saints there has ever been. But he is also a fallible man, a betraying friend, and a sometimes unfaithful disciple. His virtues are many, which make his shortcomings all the more apparent.

⁴ Cf. Jn 18. 18.

Yes, although Peter was an ambivalent disciple, Jesus nevertheless used Peter as he built his Church: a Church of redeemed sinners, every one of us; a Church of ambivalent disciples, all of us; a Church whose only true hope rests in Christ.

Today, whether we are able to make quick decisions or not, let us resolve to be *less ambivalent* about our relationship with Christ. May we declare afresh our belief in his saving power; may we find new ways to express our love for him; and may we decide, once again and without ambivalence, to faithfully follow him.

Amen.