

What does love look like? – Easter 3

Acts 9:1–20; Psalm 30; John 21:1–19

What does love look like?

In today's readings we have two dramatic and compelling stories about two very different men – Saul who persecuted Jesus and Peter who abandoned him.

Passionate men who loved, but got it wrong – some of the time.

When Othello spoke of himself as one who loved "not wisely but too well", he was about to kill himself and bring that great tragedy to a conclusion. I don't believe that you *can* love too well. Love has no limits. But you can certainly love unwisely – if love manifests itself in unwise actions that in the end, like Othello's jealousy, don't look like love at all but more like ego or self-interest.

It makes you wonder what love *does* look like. Does it look like violence in the perceived cause of the beloved? Or placing self-interest in first place, ahead of the beloved? Probably not. That does not mean that self-interest is always wrong or that championing the cause of the beloved is always wrong.

But how do we get it right? Where is our focus? What *are* we doing? Like Saul and Peter in today's readings, have we lost our way? Remember those big red highway signs that say "WRONG WAY GO BACK"?

They don't tell you where to go or how to get there. They just let you know that right now you are not in the right place.

Love can also be a bit like spelling a difficult word. We may not know exactly what is required but when we give it a go, we can often tell whether or not it looks right or feels right.

In today's readings we have two instances of this.

Saul and Peter were both men of faith, men who wanted to do the right thing. And both of them got a wakeup call.

Saul was zealous for God. He followed the rules and commandments. He knew how things ought to be done and he worked hard to ensure that that was how they *were* done, by himself and by others. If others did not do things the right way, he let them know - sometimes by quite forceful means. He thought of himself as righteous for the Lord, but somehow his own righteousness was more important than his love of the Lord. Like Othello, he had moved from love to self-interest.

I have been Saul. Caring, passionate, but narrow and limited, forgetting the important things.

Saul set himself up as God's avenger. This is not a job you volunteer for, especially if there is no vacancy. Saul loved God but forgot that he was not called to act as God's judge, pronouncing the verdicts and facilitating the penalties.

Peter was equally passionate and zealous. He swore his love for Jesus and even drew his sword against trained Roman soldiers to defend Jesus when they came to arrest him. That is extreme bravery by any measure. But then later in the courtyard, amongst the servants and officials, he denied that he even knew Jesus. Three times. The shame of it!

I have been Peter. He knew with great conviction that he loved Jesus and would never fail him or abandon him. But he did.

Saul and Peter. You and I. Love and devotion with failure and shame. But the story does not end there. In both of today's readings there is a reinstatement.

Saul is blinded by his vision. He learns to see things differently, and ultimately becomes quite another person. The Lord said to Ananias, “. . . *This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*” Ananias must have been astounded. This man! The notorious Saul!

Did it happen? We know that it did. The gospel says of Saul, “*At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*”

And what about Peter? Jesus appears to him and says, “*Feed my lambs!*” “*Take care of my sheep!*” “*Follow me!*” And this time Peter does just that – to the end of his life.

In the Psalms and in the words of the confession we may be reminded of Saul and Peter.

In the words of Psalm 103,

⁸ The Lord is full of compassion and mercy:
Slow to anger and of great goodness.

⁹ He will not always be chiding:
Nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins:
Nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.

¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth:
So far has he set our sins from us.

¹³ As a father is tender towards his children:
So is the Lord tender to those that fear him.

¹⁴ For he knows of what we are made:
He remembers that we are but dust.

Or in Psalm 30, which we had today:

² O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.

Our deeds are not a perpetual condemnation. With repentance comes forgiveness and reconciliation. Like Saul and Peter we are reinstated.

When we confess our sins, we speak of what we have done (think of Saul); and what we have failed to do (think of Peter). God's forgiveness reconciles us to God and reinstates us, not just to feel better about ourselves, but to *serve* as disciples of Jesus. Like Saul and Peter we have another chance. How will we use it?

I could finish there but, I hear you say, what about the fish? That one there in the frying pan.

[Indicate bread roll and fish in frying pan in front of altar.]

I cannot fail to mention that today's Gospel reading contains one of my favourite sayings of Jesus, "*Come and have breakfast.*"

When we consider the wonder of the resurrection, what marvellous things were said by Jesus after he rose from the dead?

There were a few but probably the first saying that comes to mind is not, "*Come and have breakfast.*"

Yet it speaks of love, of the realities of life, of sustaining people before asking anything 'courageous' of them, of the incarnational love of God. And much more.

Before Peter was reinstated and commissioned, he was fed. Along with others.

God does not send us out running on empty. We can feed together on the love of Christ, and then take his love into the world.

Walking together with Jesus to take his love into the world.

I believe that *that* is what love looks like.