

Some of the miracles performed by Jesus have been questionable? Why? Because some were witnessed by fishermen. (: Last week our star was Thomas, this week, Peter, the fisherman. There is a small detail in today's gospel which should not be missed. It is a subtle clue to the message of the gospel. That hint is the charcoal fire.

There are only two charcoal fires in the gospels: the fire in today's gospel, the other in Pilate's courtyard where Peter warmed himself during Christ's trial.

These charcoal fires are the subtle connection between Peter's threefold denial of Christ in Pilate's courtyard and Christ's threefold question to Peter by the lakeside. It is a charcoal fire, not a roaring flames of angry words. The wound of Peter's denial of Christ was healed not with a raging fire, but with a friendly reprimand and generous commitment on the part of Peter.

There on the shore of the lake Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" He was being given a chance to undo the damage, layer by layer. In addition, something else is happening in the original language, something that doesn't appear in English.

There are several words for 'love' in Greek. Look at two of them. 'Philo' means to love someone as a friend; 'agape' means to love someone in the distinctive way that Jesus loved: unselfishly, unconditionally, and endlessly.

Agape is deeper and wider than the first, because it doesn't depend on like-mindedness as friendship does; it can even reach out to include one's enemies.

Now, Jesus first asked Peter, 'Agape me?' (Do you love me with this kind of love?) Peter replies, 'Philo se'. (I love you as a friend.) The second time the words are the same. But the third time, Jesus asks him, "Do you love me as a friend?" And Peter answers as before, "I love you as a friend."

Prior to the Passion, Peter claimed agape for Jesus, but afterward Peter admitted he wasn't yet able to love Jesus in that heroic way; he could love him only as the friend. William Ward wrote, "We should be thankful for our tears: They prepare us for a clearer vision of God." Peter's tears of denial proved this true.

The third time around, Jesus steps down, as it were, to accept what Peter was able to offer at that time. I do believe that all forms of love and friendship are capable of advancing gradually towards 'agape', the heroic kind of love that Jesus had. We do so by doing the best we can at the time.

Peter was not able to rise to heroic love on that occasion. But he understood friendship. Friendship is the best rehearsal for agape. We see this in a couple that begins as friends but then fall in love and promise their lives for one another.

Peter's first instinct, once he had turned his back on Jesus, was to go back to the past. Like Jonah he set off in the wrong direction. But also like Jonah he didn't get very far; God's mercy caught up with him. Then when he was brought face to face with Jesus he couldn't quite grasp what he was being brought into.

He would have to be dragged into the future: "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Peter's task was to let himself be dragged into the future, even though all his instincts may have rebelled against it.

He is a sign to every believer. Sometimes life presents itself in a bad way and we want to flee to the past or to hide. But there before us stands the humble figure of Peter, the rooster by his side. If the compassion of Christ extends to him it can extend to us too, not matter what our past denials.

In early Christian art Peter was always portrayed with the rooster beside him; this identified him. It was to give courage to the many Christians who had buckled under persecution and, like Peter, had betrayed the Lord. If he was received with mercy by Christ, so, they knew, would they be received.

But in later times, when the Church was strengthened, Peter was portrayed holding the keys of the Kingdom. St Paul knew the paradoxical ways of God: "When I am weak," he wrote, "then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). It is true of Peter too. Peter was told by Jesus, "Strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). It is in his very weakness, his humility, that he does it.

For Peter, love for Christ would mean caring for the whole flock. And Peter will do exactly that for the rest of his life. We, too, are called to care for a portion of that flock, be it our parish, our family, our children, a spouse, an aging parent, those for whom the Lord is calling us to care now.

Like Peter, we show our love for Christ not by what we say but by caring for others, feeding their minds, souls and bodies. Jesus is saying to Peter and to us, "Show me – feed my sheep." That is the mission Jesus gives to Peter on the seashore and to us this day.

Jesus says that Peter will glorify God by his death just as Jesus has glorified God by his. By the time of the writing of this Gospel, Peter had been martyred by crucifixion in Rome.

Tradition has it that he asked to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to emulate his Lord - And could finally and truly whispered, "Agape Lord. Agape!"

At the final judgment, perhaps Jesus will ask us just one question, "Do you love me?" Or better, let our lives first show him how much we love him.