

27th June 2021 – Peter & Paul, Apostles & Martyrs - Chris's Sermon.

John 21:15-22

In Matthew's Gospel (and in Luke), Jesus shares one final conversation with his disciples at the end of his earthly life – the end of his time with them. In the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel (Mt 28), Jesus commissions the disciples – he calls them to go out into the world and make disciples of all the nations – baptising in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit.

And, most importantly, I think this calling is a way of talking about our spiritual calling – a calling (or hunger) to build connections with other people who are also hungry – our hunger to connect with those around us who are searching for meaning – searching for the sacred.

Our Gospel today describes Peter's calling to feed the hungry, but it can also be a source of encouragement for us – it reminds us of our calling to do the same – to feed those around us who are hungry for God and the things of God.

Jesus questions Peter directly: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Peter replies, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus then tells Peter to feed his lambs.

Jesus repeats the question two more times –

and Peter again assures Jesus that he does indeed love him with his whole heart.

Each time the question is asked and answered, Jesus tells Peter to tend the lambs and feed God's sheep.

Peter assures Jesus that he does love him, not once but three times. But, Jesus still isn't satisfied – he continues to talk to Peter about his calling. (What does it mean for Peter to tend the Lambs – feed the sheep?)

He says to Peter, "When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go..."

So, in a sense, Jesus reminds Peter (and us today) that ministry is intensely demanding.

We're reminded that it will sometimes lead us out into the world – to places we wouldn't normally choose to go.

As I look back on my 5 years in this parish and my 25 years of formation and ministry in the diocese, I'm very aware of the blessings that I've received and shared with those around me.

But, I'm also aware of the struggles – the challenges and the demands that I've experienced - as a parish priest – but also as a chaplain – working in nursing homes, and prisons, and hospitals and schools – working with the sick and the dying. (A lot of the time, I found myself working in a ministry that I didn't fully understand – called to stand as a representative of God – led by the Spirit in ways that I didn't fully understand (as that's as it should be). This is the ministry that Peter was called to offer – to be led by the power and presence of the Spirit (a Spirit that often moves through us in mysterious ways).

I think we're all called to serve (in different ways) – in our work, in our interests and in our relationships.

Yes, I am a priest called to serve in God's Church, but I'm also a father and a husband and a friend.

(As I've said before, ministry is a bit like becoming a parent –

in the beginning most of us have no idea what we've gotten ourselves into.) I have 4 adult children.

I love them dearly but (at times) it's been hard work. Like all parents, I've loved my kids and watched them grow. I've encouraged them to be hungry for God and the things of God. (And, ministry offers similar challenges – and similar rewards.)

But, it's not an easy calling. Sometimes, as a parent, I've felt tired and worn out (this was especially true when the kids were young) – sometimes I've felt frustrated or even disappointed by their behaviour. And, like Peter, sometimes I was called to places that I didn't really want to visit.

(I was once called down to the school to meet with one of Jordan's teachers – after he'd misbehaved in class.)

I'm sure you can imagine – I wasn't wrapped about the visit, given the circumstances.

But, as a parent, this was my responsibility. As parents, we don't get to choose – our lives are not our own.

(I'm sure most parents can relate to this.) This is what Jesus is saying to Peter about ministry – ministry calls for the same commitment.

In order to feed God's sheep, Peter must accept the responsibilities of his calling – he must be willing to stretch out his hands and allow God to fasten a belt around his waist. Like a new parent, he must take responsibility for the needs of those in his care. (Powerful imagery.)

Jesus talks to Peter about being girded – a belt tied around his outer clothing – holding the loose clothing in place, allowing for travel or movement, especially over rough ground. (The symbolism is great.)

Jesus is telling Peter that he is now bound to God – tied to God. His life is no longer his own – he's called into service. (he's given responsibilities that he doesn't fully understand – and called to give himself to a life that he won't control.)

This is a serious business. Peter is called to go where God leads him.

We could argue today that Peter was unique – called to a life of service beyond the expectations God would place on us. (That's a very comfortable idea.)

He was, after all, one of the 12 disciples. He knew the historical Jesus – he grew in his faith, while travelling with Jesus.

He was singled out by Jesus. He was given the name Peter – the rock on which the church was to be built.

But, we're not off the hook. This message is relevant to us as well. I would remind you that Peter was a man – a simple man, far from perfect. In the book of Acts, he's described as uneducated and common.

On more than one occasion, he argued with Jesus. We see Peter fail on many occasions.

It failed him on the water when the storm threatened his life.

And, of course, it failed him when he denied Jesus, not once but three times.

Peter is human – he's just a man. (He's like us.) And, in times of danger and doubt, we see him fail again and again and again.

And, yet, despite all these failings, Jesus calls Peter to feed the lambs and tend the sheep.

Jesus still calls Peter to stretch out his hands and allow God to fasten a belt around him.

And, Peter did discover his calling – his road. And, he remained faithful to it, building up the church in Jerusalem and then in Samaria, Joppa, Caesarea, Antioch, Corinth and Rome.

He spoke out in support of Paul's missionary work in Antioch and supported the growth of the gentile church, working alongside Paul until his own death.

Yes, the belt was fastened around his waist and he was taken to places he didn't want to go, as Jesus predicted. But, in the end, he went.

So, today we're reminded that this calling is a serious business – a commission to feed God's sheep – feed the hungry.

Those of us who experience the resurrection and truly know the power of God – those of us who are fed by God's grace and are still hungry for more – these people know the true nature of discipleship.

We walk in the footsteps of Peter and Paul and the missionaries of the early church.

Like Peter, we too are girded by the will of God – God's strength and God's love.

We are called to stretch out our hands and allow God to fasten a belt around us.

And, while this ministry will lead us out into the world – into the unknown and some places (perhaps) that we'd rather avoid – we continue to move forward – inspired by the power of the Spirit and our hunger for the things of God.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, in every generation you call ministers of your word and sacraments.

Equip us to preach the Gospel, to care for your people and show forth the fruit of your Spirit in our lives.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.