Firstly I must acknowledge Michael, who I imagine has laboured long at his desk to outline a plan of study for seven weeks on the 15 verses the Congregational Council has chosen as our Church’s guiding text for the near future.

Last week we heard the first of our study, the subject of which was the resurrected Christ and how our lives might be impacted by the fact of his resurrection.

This morning my focus from the John 21 passage, is on “Simon” and how his experience on that early morning so long ago might impact our lives now and into the future.

Now I have always felt empathetic to Simon/Peter. ”He was impulsive and it got him into trouble. In Matthew we are told he believes he sees Jesus walking on the water and says, “if it is you Lord, command me to walk on water too. Really impulsive.

When he realises the resurrected Jesus is on the shore, he grabs his outer garment and jumps into the sea and wades to shore, impatient to be with Jesus. No decorum at all. Reminds me of me.

And like me, such a fallible human being but because of a loving Jesus, a man reconciled with God himself.

So John then records a dialogue that occurred between Jesus and Simon.

And during that dialogue, three times Jesus basically asked Peter, “Do you love me”? and three times Simon replies.

Was Jesus hard of hearing? I don’t think so. Jesus I believe is thrice asking the question to remind Simon of his recent thrice denial of Christ after Jesus’s arrest. It is also important to note that Jesus addresses Peter by his former name “Simon”, not the name he had already begun to acquire, which was Cephas, meaning rock. Was this a subtle reminder that Peter had not stood as a rock in faithfulness to Jesus? And in what way had Peter been unfaithful?

You could be excused for thinking that Christ was condemning Peter’s self-preservation instincts in denying Christ as his Lord. But I have always thought Peter in that context was rather sensible. He is near angry priests determined to destroy the upstart Christ and perhaps his disciples. They were in a very overcrowded Jerusalem full of travellers and strangers during the celebration of the Jewish Passover. There are the Romans with “hair-like triggers”. A very volatile situation. I might liken it to me being in Afghanistan assisting the earthquake victims and am confronted with hostile Taliban who insist I work in a burqa and rather than preserve self, I reply, Christ is my Lord and he has liberated me from impractical cultural conventions.

Well before I decide that this is a necessary requirement of being Christ’s follower, I’d better be sure the context of Simon’s denial is understood.

Jesus makes at least two very relevant prophecies concerning Peter. The first is made and is recorded in John chapter 1, verse 42. **Jesus says, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).** Now in Jewish tradition, names are very significant and “rock” it meant! Simon became Cephas, “the rock”. What does that image convey? Steadiness? Unflinching character? And did Peter later regard it as a promise, when in his darkest hours, he would not doubt his steadiness? Later I will remind us all that we have promises to sustain us in our darkest hour.

The second prophecy was told to Peter during the last supper. Jesus told Peter he would deny him three times before the cock crowed. Now with all that will soon happen, why does Jesus say this to Peter? Context is important. Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is to come. In Luke 22 it records this dialogue between Jesus and Peter.

 ‘Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, **but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail;** **and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers**.’

**And he [Peter] said to him, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!’ 34Jesus said, ‘I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.’**

Now what has Peter done here? In his impulsive way, Peter ignores the fact that Jesus says he will fail and shows no gratitude for Jesus’s prayers but arrogantly says I am ready to die for you. Now this is another reason I empathise with Peter. He has foot and mouth disease. Unfortunately for Peter and indeed me, and perhaps all of us at times, we need humbling. Peter was fallible but so are we all. So how does Jesus deal with this sinner?

Jesus’ reminder at the Sea of Galilee that EARLY MORNING recorded in John 21 was more about the humbling of Peter than about when and if we should self-preserve. And was this thrice asked question and calling Peter Simon enough to turn Peter back to strengthen his brothers? No. Not yet. Peter stuffs up again. He sees John behind him and asks Jesus what is **his** destiny and Jesus replies what is tantamount to “mind your own business.” But never so rudely and bluntly.

Jesus expresses this as a question. **“What is that to you? Follow me.”**  Much gentler a reply and a reply which makes no comparison and focusses solely on Peter.

And where does that conversation take place? We realise when John is observed by Peter to be following them, that Jesus has drawn Peter aside for this conversation. Jesus did not seek to humiliate Peter in front of the others but does gently remind Peter of his need for humility and the need to focus on His own walk as his follower. John does not tell us how long Peter took to recover his spirits which I daresay would be crushed for a while. We know in other accounts that Peter indeed became the rock of the church.

What impact does this final image have on us and our lives now and in the future?

Make no mistake, Jesus is clearly aware of our failings and obviously has some foreknowledge of our future directions as he did of Peter. Regardless, he walks beside us, and continues to guide and teach. It is Jesus’ love that given, inspires us to accept his Lordship and continue to grow.

From Peter’s experience that is recorded in John 21 we can be confident that Jesus too is with us from the very beginning, has “X-ray vision” but his love can heal and guide us. We can know forgiveness and when we “turn back” to Christ we can grow – maybe not become a rock – perhaps only remain an annoying pebble in a shoe – but can be loved and forgiven and become a changing follower of Jesus.

And like Peter, we have what we can regard as promises. One example is from then end of Jude:

**To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.**

I’d like to pray for us:

**May our own faith not fail;** but if we hesitate from following Jesus, when once we turn back, may we be able to strengthen one another.’ Amen.

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