

**SERMON – 4/9/22**  
**'Five Marks of Mission 2 - Nurture'**

John 21:15-19

“Jesus said to Peter: 'Feed my sheep'” (John 21:17)

We are reflecting in our Sunday services this month on the Five Marks of Mission that are the focus of mission planning across the Church of Scotland at this time, shaping the church to fit the challenges of our time rather than the expectations of the past. Last Sunday we were thinking about the crying need there is in our time for the proclamation of the Good News about Jesus in a society where for too long it has been assumed that everyone knows what we are talking about but where the message has actually been so suppressed that most of our neighbours are completely unaware of (or at best misinformed about) the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. The message of the Gospel needs to be proclaimed not just from the pulpits of our land shut away in churches for a minority to hear, but through the lives of each one of us in homes and schools and workplaces, in market-places and in the media, in word and in deed. We need to Tell.

We also need to Teach. Our second theme is that of nurture and this morning I would like to reflect with you on the significance for the growth of the church not only of sharing the Good News with people and inviting them to follow Jesus but of *deepening* the faith of those who accept that invitation and continuing to develop discipleship and commitment amongst those who bear the name of Christian. Mission is not just about outreach. It is also about what you might call inreach or upreach. Mission is not only about quantitative growth. It is also about qualitative growth. And I want to think with you this morning about what we all need to be doing as a church to be displaying this second mark of mission – nurture or teaching – not only for the young or for the newcomer but for all of us.

For a long time I had thought that this morning's famous Gospel reading was self-explanatory – it was simply that just as Peter had denied Jesus three times on the night of His arrest, now here the risen Lord is carefully restoring Him to a fruitful role in the ministry and mission of the church. What a wonderful message of grace! No-one can ever sink so low that they cannot be

redeemed; no disciple of Christ can ever mess up so badly that they cannot again be useful in the Lord's service. That's an important message to hear and maybe someone here needs to hear that reassurance today.

But there is more in these verses than we might first think. Delving into the original text, there are hidden not one, not two, not three but four pairs of words, the distinctions between some of which are virtually untranslatable into English but which, it seems to me, must be there for some reason, given that the author has chosen to use them in a passage where there otherwise is so much repetition.

There are two different words for sheep – the grown-up ones and the baby ones, lambs. There are two distinct words for what Peter is called to do to the sheep – namely feed them and take care of them. There are two different words for love – the first time Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him and Peter replies by saying that he likes or admires Him; then the third time Jesus takes up the word Peter is using: Do you like me? Do you admire me? And finally there are two distinct words for know, the difference between which is actually very difficult to render into English.

But the use of these pairs of words prompts me to ask you each (as I ask myself) to reflect on where we are along the journey of faith and what nurture we might each benefit from to take us to a deeper level of discipleship.

First of all, as the Lord's people, we are often likened in the Bible to sheep, but the question that our passage raises for us this morning is this: what kind of sheep are we? We might be the sheep of God's pasture that the psalmist speaks of, or we might be sheep who have gone astray. We might be mature sheep, fruitful members of the flock in need of sustenance for the journey, or we might be little lambs, weak and helpless, unable to fend for ourselves and in need of God's mothering. In His re-commissioning of Peter, Jesus makes clear that His care is for each one – Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep. Have you ever really considered what you are in relation to the Good Shepherd, what you might most urgently require of Him, and what you need the church family to be to you in order to nurture you most effectively?

Jesus asks Simon Peter: 'Do you love me more than these?' His question might mean: 'Do you love me more than the other disciples do? Or it might mean: 'Do you love me more than you love these others?' It could even mean, 'Do you love me more than you love this fishing gear that you've gone running back to at the first opportunity?' Or 'Do you admire me or even like me? Never mind now what it was exactly that Jesus was asking Peter that day – what is He asking you today? What do you think of Jesus? Do *you* love Him? Do you *truly* love Him? Do you love *Him* more than you love other people? Do you love *Him* more than you love other things in your life? Do you love Jesus? Do you love Him like that or would your reply be something slightly different? Lord, you know that I admire you; you know that I have a great deal of affection for you; you know that I'm passionate about things you are passionate about. The greatest commandment is this: Love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. We all need to be nurtured into that level of response.

We read how Peter replied to Jesus: 'Lord, you know that I love you,' and on the third occasion 'You know everything; you've come to know that I love you.' I wonder, dear friends, what is there for Christ to come to know of our love for Him – yours and mine? Christ knows everything; He sees into the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds and He knows how much we really love Him – is it just something we put on now and then, for appearance's sake, our Sunday best, or is it something that is evident through everything we do and say and think, even (perhaps especially) when no-one else is looking? Is the depth of our love for the Lord something that Christ may know not just because He knows everything but because He (and anyone else for that matter) may come to know it by the life that we live? We can be sure that Christ knows us completely – He knows what we are really like – but what is there for other people to know of our love for Christ? It cannot remain something quietly declared in a moment of personal prayer or celebrated in worship with those who gather week by week in the house of God. The fact of the matter is that our actions and our attitudes say much more about the reality of our love for Jesus than our words ever can. When Jesus says to us this morning: *Do you love me*, what is there to be known of that love? Where is the evidence?

Finally, we are reminded of the kind of nurture that is available from God Himself. Christ the Good Shepherd looks after His flock by making them lie down in green pastures (that is to say where there is plenty of nourishment), by leading them by still waters (where there is refreshment), by restoring their strength, by leading them the right way, by guiding them safely through the darkest valley, protecting them along the way. Jesus commissions Peter to be a shepherd and He commissions people in every place and in every generation, to take care of God's people by protecting them, by leading them in such a way that they find nourishment and refreshment and renewal.

What is it that you most need today, spiritually? Perhaps it is protection from the temptation to stray from the right path, maybe it is a quiet space to rest for a while and be refreshed, perhaps it is the most basic of spiritual nourishment, or a more balanced diet or something that will build you up for a particular reason. Put yourself in the care of the Good Shepherd today and ask Him to meet your needs; many of them you will find met within the pastoral and nurturing fellowship of the flock of God; you yourself may be the means of meeting another's needs today in your conversation after church, in the practical help you can offer from the gifts God has given you. Feed my lambs, says Jesus. Take care of my sheep. That's a word for us all.

Today Christ is calling you by name – son of Adam, daughter of Eve – and asking you tenderly and graciously: Do you love me? How will you respond to that question and what nourishment or care do you need to help you grow and deepen your faith and be all you can be as a disciple of Christ? Jesus knows you and He knows what you need – let Him care for you. Be sure that the Lord is seeking to deal with each and every one of us here this morning, to speak into our hearts a unique message of hope and challenge, of rebuke and restoration that is not for anyone else to hear but only you. What is the Good Shepherd saying to *you* today?

As the visible Body of Christ in this place we are called to be a nurturing church, and I don't just mean in a basic human way, attending to people's practical and physical needs but in a way that will bring growth and deepening of faith to every single one of us, from the new-born to the most senior, from the person

who has just come to faith in Christ to the one who is far-ben in that faith.

I hope that increasingly our discipleship corner may be a place where people gravitate over coffee after services and at other times in the week, to talk together, to ask questions, to minister to one another, to explore the books and other resources that are there and in so doing to seek a deeper faith. Jesus said to Peter: 'Feed my sheep'. Let's be doing that as a nurturing church.