



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Solemnity of Sts Peter & Paul

Do you love me more than these?

Readings: 1 Kings 19:16,19-21, Ps 15, Galatians 5:1,13-18, Luke 9:51-62

We are privileged, little brothers and sisters of Christ, to assemble at the altar of sacrifice on this glorious feast day of the great saints of our confession in Christ. Peter, the rock on whom Christ's Church is built and Paul on whose universal mission the Church of God was launched and has been engaged ever since.

We know them as saints, holy men of God, and as martyrs, those whose love for Jesus has taken them the whole journey to offer their lives in solidarity with Christ for the salvation of the world.

We rejoice doubly in their glorification because we know that these fragile human beings were not always thus.

Peter had his wobbles, his moments of fear and doubt and compromise before his restoration and final commitment to the Gospel.

We know that Paul began as an enemy of the Faith and a bitter persecutor of the faithful until he was upended by God in an overwhelming encounter.

They went on to pledge their lives absolutely to Jesus and to spreading the news of God's decisive action on the Cross of Calvary in washing away our sins and promising to all in Christ the final reconciliation with God and life eternal in His Presence.

With the benefit of the hindsight of history, we see all that. The Apostles could not and they had to move forward in faith. Every day was a test of that faith and a trial of their love.

Today's Gospel brings us back to the familiar territory of the threefold restoration of Peter. Denying his Lord three times at the vital moment of the Passion, Peter is challenged on the Galilee shoreline to commit anew to Jesus. Jesus asks him simply, 'Do you love me more than these?'

Peter is shamefaced, puzzled and conflicted. Can he really answer that after his failure in Jerusalem? Can he truly say he loves Jesus more than John did, the Beloved Disciple who had the courage to stand at the foot of the Cross?

Jesus asks Peter, 'Do you love me?' And the Greek word used is '*agape*'. The use of this word is not accidental. *Agape* is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. It is the highest of the four types of love in the Bible.

Peter replies, 'Yes, Lord, I love you.' But the word he uses is '*philo*'. This means love but it is closer to deep personal friendship or abiding interest in something. An Anglophile is someone who loves England. A Philosopher is someone who loves wisdom, etc, etc. It is not a sacrificial 'go to the cross' love.

Three times Jesus asks Peter if he 'agapes' Him. Three times Peter replies with 'philo'.

Amazingly Jesus still gives him the job He originally gave him as 'rock' and premier apostle. Because, I guess, in His divine wisdom Jesus knew that we can only say 'philo' – I want to be your friend. Agape is something we grow into, something we come to on the long road of discipleship.

Loving Jesus often comes on the other side of our failures. Often comes when we know how badly we have let Him down and standing, sheepishly before Him as He reconciles us and asks us to recommit.

Knowing His love and mercy is what gives us the courage to pick ourselves up and set out again on the disciples' road. We want to live for Him. We want His friendship, love His Presence.

The moment when we are prepared to sacrifice all for Him may not come at our choosing. For St. Peter it was an upside down cross on the Vatican Hill. For St. Paul it was the executioner's axe outside the cell in what is now the gardens of the Abbey of the Three Fountains in Rome.

The central question of Jesus reminds me of lines from a Dylan song:

'Do you love me, or are you just extending goodwill?

Do you need me half as bad as you say, or are you just feeling guilt?

*I've been hurt before and I know the score so you won't hear me
complain.*

Will I be able to count on you or is your love in vain?'

If we set out to follow the saints then friendship will become witness which will become sacrifice and we will know more deeply the mystery of this altar and know ourselves part of that company of the Apostles and Martyrs whose lives bring glory to God down all the ages and living inspiration those still in pilgrimage here.

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