

3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER

Year C

There is a marvelous *New Yorker* cartoon which depicts a moment of challenge in the life of one man. He is well on in middle years, his hair is in retreat, and thick rounded spectacles sit on his nose. Dressed in pyjamas and dressing gown he stands inside his front door staring at something on the floor. The door is heavily reinforced with steel brackets and a variety of bolts and locks and chains. It is a picture of security gone mad. There is no letter box to receive mail, but there is a peep-hole to see out. Clearly no one could penetrate this place without approval.

But something has got through this array of defences. A white envelope with a large red heart impressed on the back is lying on the floor. A valentine card has been slipped under the door. Our middle-aged hero stares in wonder. Is this a joke? Is it a flat letter-bomb? Should he claim it or push it back across the threshold? We'll never know.

Trying to get through to some people can call for impressive resources, not least patience and perseverance. It is particularly difficult with those people who live their lives in fear of *showing* their love. We get the impression that they could be accused of love only on highly circumstantial evidence. Sometimes we wonder why we bother when our tentative efforts are met with a look that could sink an aircraft carrier! But we keep trying in the hope that sheer effort will be rewarded. So we send out signals, hints, smiles, winks, sighs. One day when we are near exhaustion we might just ask the question: "Excuse me, but do you love me?"

In polite society you are not supposed to go around asking people questions like "Who do you say I am?" or "Do you love me?" Perhaps because the answers might be deadening. Questions that go to the heart of the matter, particularly when the matter concerns what you really think of another person, are usually eased out of the conversation like slightly potty relatives are eased out of the room after they have misbehaved. In today's Gospel, however, Jesus is in good voice when he asks Peter three times if he really loves him.

Remember that before the crucifixion Peter had not exactly distinguished himself. Three times he denied being a disciple of Jesus and knowing anything about him.

The man Jesus chooses to exercise primacy of authority is the one who is caught out by a servant girl as he lies insistently. He is the man who is arrested by a cock crowing in the dark.

As we hear from the epilogue of John's Gospel, after the crucifixion Peter and the disciples returned to their old trade of fishing. There is no suggestion that they believed themselves to have a mission to carry on after the death of Jesus. After Jesus had died their hopes went into the tomb and they returned to old, familiar ways. They try to cope with the loss of one who had changed their lives.

After a long night's fishing the disciples come up with zero, and a distant figure on the shore tells them to try again. They pull in a marvelous haul. The Beloved Disciple identifies the figure as Jesus, and Peter in his excitement tries treading water to be with him. Peter has a wet breakfast with the Lord.

After the meal Jesus asks Peter three times about the reality of his love. Insisting on love is something of a mark with Jesus. Three times Peter affirms his love, as three times Jesus insists on it. And when Peter professes his love Jesus commissions him to care for his flock. Seeing the Lord is always a dismissal for ministry; loving the Lord is always a charge to care for others.

And that is what Peter does – as we heard from today's first reading. In his ministry of preaching and healing Peter gets through to many people, and the authorities become nervous at the ability of Peter and the apostles to work in the name of Jesus. In spite of the opposition Peter will continue insisting on his love for Jesus and this insistence will take him to martyrdom in Rome. In the end Jesus' question "Simon, do you love me?" becomes profoundly unnecessary. There is nothing circumstantial about Peter's love.

So the question of Jesus is openly directed to each of us: "Do you love me?" But before Jesus puts the question to us he goes to enormous trouble to first assure us that **he** really loves **us**. He died making the point. When we're assured of that first love we might be less hesitant in declaring our own.

The question of Jesus stays with us hoping for an answer The question comes from one who is more interested in our future prospects than our past failures.

He doesn't pass the time in bitter recriminations. He's more interested in what can **become** of us. That kind of person is worth letting through our defences and locked doors. He's not a security risk. After all, his Valentine has already been slipped under the door.