

“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.”

John 21:18

## Peter Commissioned to Shepherd the Flock

**JOHN 21:15–19** <sup>15</sup>When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” <sup>16</sup>A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” <sup>17</sup>He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup>Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to 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.” <sup>19</sup>(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

The gospel writer creates an element of déjà vu in this scene: a charcoal fire and three questions regarding Peter's commitment to Jesus. By making a charcoal fire on the shore, Jesus has, in a sense, re-created the setting in which Peter denied him. The fire reminds Peter of the cold, hostile questioning in the courtyard of the high priest. In the presence of this new fire, which is warm and inviting, Jesus offers Peter another opportunity to affirm his discipleship.

As Peter had three times denied his relationship with Jesus, now Jesus gives Peter this threefold opportunity to express his love for him. Jesus addresses him formally as "Simon son of John" rather than as Peter (meaning "rock") because his performance has not lived up to his sturdy appellation. Peter responds more cautiously this time, more humbly aware of his vulnerability and limitations. At long last, Peter has learned that he cannot follow Jesus in a way that relies only on his own strength and willpower. Each of his affirmations of love offsets his earlier rejections. In the light of this new day, Peter's agonizing over his denials is brought to an end as he experiences the healing and reconciling presence of the risen Lord.

The question Jesus puts to Peter is ambiguous: "Do you love me more than these?" (verse 15). Is Jesus asking whether Peter loves him more than these fish that they have caught and eaten, this is, more than his profession? Is he asking if Peter loves him more than he loves these other disciples? Or is Jesus asking whether Peter loves him more than his other disciples love him? All three must be true. Peter must love Jesus more than he loves other people or his fishing business, and he must love Jesus more than the others do because he must be willing to render extraordinary sacrifice on behalf of his master.

Jesus' threefold question leads to his entrusting Peter with the care of his flock. The triple commissioning expresses Peter's solemn obligation. These sheep, so precious to Jesus, are now given to the care of the sinful yet forgiven Peter. This kind of pastoral care is modeled on that of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The responsibility given to Peter implies total dedication to the community of faith, guidance through teaching and preaching, and self-giving even to the point of giving his life for them.

Jesus had said that the Good Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep, so Jesus follows his commission of Peter as shepherd with a prediction of his death (verses 18–19). With his freedom taken away from him, Peter will be led to the place of his execution where he will stretch out his hands in cru-

cifixion. By the time John's gospel was completed, the evangelist would have known that Peter died a martyr's death under the persecution of Nero in Rome.

Jesus ends his commissioning of Peter with the same words that began their relationship: "Follow me." Only now Peter's call to follow Jesus takes on a new and deeper meaning. For the remaining decades of his life, Peter will live in the shadow of the cross, just as Jesus did. He will follow the great Shepherd, tending his flock as shepherd of Christ's followers. And finally, he will follow Jesus in the kind of death he will suffer, and, by that death, he will bring glory to God.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What do I admire most about Peter? What is his experience teaching me about being a disciple of Jesus and serving his church?

- Before commissioning Peter for service, Jesus did not ask about his strength or endurance. He asked only if Peter's love for him was supreme. Why does love for Jesus make all the difference?

### **Prayer**

*Good Shepherd, you know that I love you. Enable me to open my heart fully to you and follow you as a mature and consistent disciple. Help me to love and care for those you have entrusted to me.*