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Readers' Service

A Service for Easter

The Ultimate Question

by

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EASTER SEASON

ORDER OF SERVICE

Call to Worship:

We meet together today in the precious name of Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord. He has conquered sin and death for us and has opened the Kingdom of heaven to all who trust in him.

Therefore let us lift up our hearts and voices in praise and adoration as we worship him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Hymn HP 212: - 'Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son.'

Prayer:

Let us pray:

*Father God, we praise you for your goodness towards us.
We have rebelled against your commandments and sinned against you in thought, in word and in deed,
but you did not leave us in darkness.
You sent your only Son into the world that He might set us free from the power of evil.*

*He suffered death for us on the cruel cross,
but you raised him from the tomb that He might live for ever,
our risen and ascended Lord.*

We remember his gracious promise that wherever two or three are gathered in his Name, he will be there in the midst.

*Even now as we worship together, we would claim that promise for ourselves.
Lord, we know that you are with us, but we pray that we may feel your presence, that we may hear your voice speaking to us your words of grace,
that your Spirit may witness with our spirits that we truly are your children.
So let your blessing rest upon us that we may grow in grace, and learn to trust You more and more.*

We ask our prayer in Jesus' Name. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Please now turn to number 831 in the Hymn Book. It is entitled, 'A Song Of Christ's Glory.' The words come from St Paul's letter to the Philippians. I invite you to join in the passages in the darker print.

Hymn HP 190: - 'Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.'

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication:

With joyful hearts we offer our gifts to You, O Lord, the giver of all good and perfect gifts. Accept and bless them we pray, that they may be used to build your Kingdom on earth, to spread abroad the good news of your love, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The Peace:

When the risen Christ returned to his disciples, he greeted them with the words,

"Peace be with you."

Let us greet each other with those same words of peace.

"The peace of the risen Christ be with you all."

(Response) *"And also with you."*

Take a few moments now to share that peace with each other in Jesus' Name.

Prayers of Intercession:

Let us share now in a ministry of intercession for the world.

Let us pray:

Easter-time comes in the spring, when new life is appearing everywhere. In our prayers let us remember all those involved in bringing life where there has been coldness and death. So let our first prayers be for the decade of evangelism, for evangelists, and all who work at local level, offering the new and fuller life that Jesus Christ offers to the world. Let us pray for those who are part of Easter People and Spring Harvest as they return to their own Churches with new vision. (Silence)

**LORD IN YOUR MERCY
HEAR OUR PRAYER.**

Let us pray for the Church Overseas, especially for missionaries who have gone in the name of our Missionary Society to work alongside local Christians. Let us give thanks for strong areas of growth in many lands - for thousands of new Christians as they seek to work out their faith in their communities. And for the whole Church of Jesus Christ, that God's people may be faithful in service and witness. (Silence)

**LORD IN YOUR MERCY
HEAR OUR PRAYER.**

Let us pray for those who produce and distribute the world's food. For farmers as they prepare for another harvest; for fishermen as they face the perils of the deep. Especially let us pray for those parts of the world where there has been no harvest in recent times, either due to drought or warfare; for those who have few resources and for whom the lack of a harvest will mean starvation. So let us also pray for the relief agencies who seek to bring food to those communities where it is needed most. (Silence)

**LORD IN YOUR MERCY
HEAR OUR PRAYER.**

Let us pray for our own communities. For our schools and colleges as they begin a new summer term; especially for those who will be taking examinations in the next couple of months. For those who will be taking the advantage of longer and warmer days to go away on holiday; and for those who must stay at home for a variety of reasons. For the elderly and for the sick, for young families and for those who are unemployed. Let us remember before God our own families and our loved ones, commending them to our Heavenly Father's care.

Father God, we bring all these our intercessions before you and pray that we may be given faith to trust you for all that is to come. We ask our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn HP 196: - 'I know that my Redeemer lives.'

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

The Epistle: 1 Corinthians 15: 1 - 9

The Gospel: John 21: 1 - 14

SERMON (SEE ATTACHED SHEETS)

Hymn HP 251: - 'All for Jesus - all for Jesus.'

The Blessing:

Go forth in the Saviour's peace. May his love and power fill your lives as you seek to serve him. And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.

SERMON

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

There is a very simple question which is of supreme importance in human relationships. Mothers ask their children, lovers ask each other, married couples too after many years together. It comprises four little words, "*Do you love me?*" The answer can affect our happiness - even change the whole course of our lives! When we turn to the last story in the last of the gospels, we find even there that this question is at the heart of the drama of the risen Christ.

It was on the beach by the side of the lake as that small group of men sat around a charcoal fire with fish cooking on it, that the risen Jesus looked into the eyes of the man who only a few days before had denied him, and quietly and calmly asked this question, "*Do you love me?*"

Simon Peter and his friends had been fishing all night on the lake, but their efforts had been in vain. They had caught nothing at all. Then in the first light of dawn they had been hailed by a man on the beach asking them if they had caught any fish. When they replied that they had been unsuccessful he had told them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. They had followed his instruction and immediately caught so many fish that they could not pull the net over the side of the boat because it was so heavy. It was John who had said "*It is the Lord*" and Peter who on hearing this had jumped over the side into the water and swam ashore.

Now the boat had been beached and the fish sorted and counted - the gospel tells us that there were 153 fish - and some of them were cooked for breakfast. Picture those eight men sitting around the fire, watching the charcoal glowing and the fish sizzling. There is something poignant about the situation. There are only two occasions when a charcoal fire is mentioned in the gospel. The other time was in the courtyard of the high priest's house. It was there that Peter had been challenged by one of the maids and had denied that he even knew Jesus. Not just once, but three times, the last with a string of fishermen's oaths!

How the memory of that must have burned within him as he sat watching the flames that morning. He must have felt so ashamed! And then, by this second charcoal fire he had faced another question. Not, "*Aren't you one of Jesus' men?*" but "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*"

In passing, we need to take note of the way Jesus addressed Simon Peter. He didn't use the name he himself had given him when they first met - the name we normally use today. On that first day, when Andrew had brought his brother to Jesus, the Lord had said, "*So you are Simon, the son of John. I'm going to call you Peter, - which means a 'rock'.*" But there had been nothing rock-like about Peter's behaviour when he had denied his Lord. And now Jesus refrains from using the name as he asked him this very special question.

FIRST - THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION OF WHAT PETER HAD DONE.

Peter had let his Lord down very badly. He had been so sure of himself that night when Jesus had warned of the dangers that lay ahead. *"I'm willing to die with you,"* he had said. And then, when questioned by a servant girl, he had blurted out his denial.

In view of this, one might have expected a different kind of question. *"Why did you do it?"* or *"I'm very disappointed in you. You failed me when the going got tough."* But there was no reproof, no hint of criticism. Only the fundamental question, *"Do you love me?"*

There is something for us all to learn here. Our society is always looking for someone to blame. Hardly a week goes by without the tabloid newspapers calling for someone's resignation! Someone has to be blamed for everything that goes wrong. A man may have given many years of faithful service, but let him make one error of judgment, step out of line or make a fool of himself and there will be those who will hound him until his career is ended by his resignation. But Jesus didn't tell Peter to resign. He was not demoted from his position as the leader of the band of disciples. He was just asked *"Do you love me?"*

It may be that this is the question the Lord is asking us today. He knows how many times we have failed him. How many times we have put the things of the world before our loyalty to him. How many times we have kept silent lest others should discover that we are followers of Jesus. The amazing thing is that Jesus does not come to us with condemnation. We may be aware of our unworthiness, but it doesn't seem to matter. He just calls us by name and says, *"Do you love me?"*

SECOND - LET US LOOK AT PETER'S ANSWER.

At first it seems very direct - very simple. *"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."* But it isn't quite what it seems. There are two different words for love used here. One by Jesus, the other by Peter. Jesus uses the verb *'agapao'* from the noun *'agape'* which St Paul uses in his well-known hymn of love in his first letter to the Corinthians. It denotes a very special kind of loving - the kind of love our Heavenly Father has for us. Peter uses *'phileo'* which is the friendship of one person for another. Some English translations give Peter's reply as, *"You know that I am your friend."* One does not have to be a Greek scholar to realise that Peter cannot bring himself to use the same word as Jesus at this moment because he is aware that his love has been tested and found wanting.

Perhaps it is a little like a wife who has just discovered that her husband has been unfaithful and says to him, *"Do you still love me?"* and he replies, *"I'm still fond of you."* It is not the same thing is it?

You will also be aware that Jesus asks Peter three times, *"Do you love me?"* But you may not be aware that the third time Jesus uses Peter's word, not his own. That on the third occasion he is saying, *"Are you still my friend?"* Is that why Peter was grieved about the third question?

Notice however, that there is no questioning of what Peter means by his reply. Jesus accepts it for what it is worth. He knew the heart of Peter. What's more, he knew that Peter would not fail him a second time. Each is being honest with the other. Peter is made aware that his failure is not going to mean that he will not be trusted again. He is also being made aware of his own weakness, and his need for the kind of strength which the risen Christ was to give him.

For us too, there is a lesson to be learned. When Jesus asks us if we love him, we may find it hard to answer with a simple 'Yes'. Perhaps we may find ourselves echoing the words of William Walsham How:

And yet I want to love thee Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
And I will love thee more and more,
Until I see thee as thou art.

FINALLY - PETER WAS ENTRUSTED WITH A MISSION.

Jesus accepted Peter's response for what it was. He didn't question it. He just went on to tell him that he had something for him to do. "*Take care of my lambs.*" After the second question and reply, the task is not quite the same. It is "*Feed my sheep.*" Both are pastoral and there is little to be gained by trying to make anything of the difference. The essential thing to note is that Simon the son of John who denied his Lord was being given a second chance. There was work for him to do. So far as we know he accepted the challenge and the responsibility and carried it out faithfully until he was finally martyred in Rome some years later.

Thank God that our Lord is prepared to use ordinary people with all their weaknesses to fulfil his mission. There is no point in saying, "*But I'm not good enough. Jesus could never use me!*" This lovely Easter story assures you that He has a task for each of us.

Jesus came to Peter there beside the lake not only because he needed to be forgiven, but also because Jesus had work for him to do. He comes to us today with forgiveness. He also comes to invite us to tend his lambs, to feed his sheep, to serve him in a variety of ways. And we know that He will always be with us. He will give us the courage and strength we need to fulfil our mission, today.