

Feed My Lambs; Feed My Sheep Seventh Week of Easter Friday, May 18, 2018 8:15 AM Acts 25:13b-21; **Jn 21:15-19** (St. John I, pope and martyr) (Jesus trying to lead us somewhere, into a solidarity with one another, including the broken, including the outcast, including the weak.)

“Do you love me, Simon Peter?”

This is a controversial section of John’s Gospel. It is the address of the risen Christ, and he has appeared to the apostles and now he is addressing Peter. The problem is in the original Greek it reads rather oddly, not in English but in Greek, because the first two times Jesus says, “Do you love me?” he uses the verb *Agapas me*, do you love me with this *agape*, which is a very strange thing to ask, actually. Now a great Scripture scholar like Raymond Brown actually says that we shouldn’t pay attention to the verb. I disagree with him because in the Fourth Gospel there are so many word plays the verb has got to be important, especially because the third time Jesus changes what he asks; and each time Peter responds with a verb different from *agape*. He says, “*Philo se*,” You know I love you, *Philo se*. So that’s the very basis of the dialogue. **“Do you love me?” “I love you,” but with two different verbs. What’s the difference?**

Well *agape* is the love that God has for his creation, and not just the beauty of creation, the grandness of creature, **but the brokenness of creation**, the sinfulness of creation, the depravity of creation. “God so loved the world,” “world” being people turning away from God; that’s what world means in John, *kosmos*. “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son.” So this is the *agape* that Jesus is asking Peter about.

But why would he? **Why would he use that verb for himself?** Well because he doesn’t mean himself in the ordinary sense. **When he says “me,” he is using the same “me” that he used with Saul on the road to Damascus.** “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He is referring to his people, his Church, his sheep, his flock. That’s why he says, “Feed my lambs.” I am now my lambs. Do you love me? **Do you love me in my brokenness?** “Feed my lambs.” Do you love me even in the dark, unredeemed elements of my people? “Tend my sheep.” So that’s the meaning of the question.

Then Peter’s answer misses the point. “*Philo se*,” you know I love you. You are my friend. You, Jesus, are my friend. This is not about Jesus. This is about the body of Christ. **This is about**

God's union with eventually all creation, but here in the beginning, the Church. The Church is the body of Christ. And it is made into a physical solidarity through the Eucharist. And so "Feed my sheep," that is what love does, real love, **the love that God has and shares with his people actually feeds sheep and tends flocks.** That is Peter's role now, although he doesn't understand it yet. He is still thinking about Jesus on a personal level.

And I have to say, that **many people in the Christian Church are with him in his lack of comprehension.** They think they love Jesus and they believe in Jesus—all well and good as a beginning, but that's not where God wants us to be. He is trying to lead us somewhere, into a **solidarity with one another, including the broken, including the outcast, including the weak.** This was understood very well by Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche; he understood this very well. He despised Christianity because Christianity promoted the love of the weak and the love of the poor, and he despised the weak and the poor. So he was anti-Christian, but for a good reason: he understood exactly what was what. Now modern atheists are ignorant; they don't even know what Christianity holds or believes, but Nietzsche did. So he rejected it for a good reason because he rejected the fundamental beliefs and values that Christ himself held to and embodied. And this is about, now, **Peter continuing in the mission of Christ. "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep."**

And meanwhile **you may be called on to witness in a way you don't like.** So now it says, "He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God." Well whether that is really what was intended, I don't know. But this is a dialogue of engagement. And Peter, as St. Augustine says, is simply standing in here for the whole Church. **It's the whole Church that is being invited into a new kind of real solidarity; and the Eucharist is the sign of that.**