



Deo Gratias

Responding to God's generous love



The address given by Archdeacon Justine on 5th February 2017

I want to tell you about Jenny, my hairdresser, and Peter, the disciple.

In village where I live – beyond the small room with birthday cards in the local shop and post office, is another small room for the hairdresser.

Jenny is queen of the hairdressing salon and every time I go I hear loads about village life. I don't listen to the Archers, but I reckon Jenny is my equivalent. Jenny is a saint – no topic is out of bounds, even with a priest there, but grumpiness gets turned into gratitude and gossip into giving back in some way. Jenny will entice you to come to bingo to raise money for a charity and always share her mantra – that when she wakes up she is grateful to God to be alive, and so should we all be.

Deo Gratias – thanks be to God, for life itself, the beauty of the earth. I think of that as **cosmic gratitude**.

And there's **personal gratitude** - Jenny is thankful to wake up alive and she is also thankful for the strength to manage her sick father and disabled son, and the energy to raise lots of money for charity, which makes a difference to people's lives.

And then there's **St Peter** – he sought answers to life and Jesus showed up, so he left his fishing nets and followed him. Peter's life as a disciple had its ups and downs – Peter showed great courage and insight, but where we see him now, he's at a turning point.

Peter was the disciple whom Jesus renamed because he would be the rock on which others would be able to stand firm, find support. He would have the keys of the kingdom – use his wisdom to lead, make decisions. But just now, he's meeting the risen Jesus, having let him down – Peter fell asleep when Jesus needed his support, he started a fight so Jesus had to heal a slave, and then, frightened for his life he denied he ever knew Jesus, three times. Peter was all talk then. Not a rock, not a wise leader and he wept over it. Now we hear Jesus asking Peter three times: Do you love me more than these?

I don't know what has brought you here today, or what brought you to follow Christ or to come to church in the first place.

Gratitude to God, perhaps – cosmic gratitude for the beauty of the earth, or the love which over and around you lies? Or personal gratitude for renewed strength, light or a miracle in a time of darkness? Or a call to follow, to love Christ more like that of Peter's experience.

You are here now at the beginning of a new chapter in the life of All Saints and Peter is here with us on the shore with Jesus asking him: do you love me more than these? These what, we wonder? These other disciples, these fishing nets and boat?

Peter is caught between the fear of his failure and the fear of following Jesus again. Jesus becomes the rock and the key for Peter. Jesus goes to the heart in his talk of love. As a key he unlocks Peter, because he gives of himself, he forgives. As a rock he is steady and safe. And Peter says – you know that I love you, three times.

Peter is called again – not to catch people as if they were fish this time, but to feed Christ's flock, to care, to tend.

That's what we are being called to do, to feed the sheep, care for the flock because we are grateful to God, because we love Christ, because we can trust and respond rather than live in fear.

God is generous, unlimited, ever giving and loving. It isn't like that for us. For human beings to be fully human we need each other – to love, to be creative, to change the flow of history. We are stronger together.

Do you love me more than these? – The heart of it is love. Love of its very nature, feels and gives and is what makes us most fully human and most like God. Feed my sheep is the natural expression of love.

You are here, connected to this church, this flock. Peter on the shore comes to a new maturity in Christ and that's always the call on our discipleship. To grow, in Christ. As we grow in Christ we take responsibility for others and we feed the sheep, in lots of different ways. Mature disciples are those on which others can rely, they are rocks; they use their insights and wisdom for the good of the whole community – they are keys to unlock care, to make decisions.

I haven't really talked about money – **'Where your treasure is there will your heart be also'**, Jesus told us. I can see that in Jenny, the hairdresser, and in Peter, the disciple. What do you see in you?

Giving out of love, out of gratitude is what makes us human. **It is in giving that we receive** -what is most precious in human life.

It doesn't really matter where you give – giving is healing for you and for our world. But as Christians we are called to feed Christ's sheep, the flock, which for us is this church.

How much and what you can manage are real questions you will need to consider.

I've offered you 3 aspects of the life of Peter to help with this –

- his renewed love of Jesus,
- his call to be the supportive rock for others to rely on,
- his maturity and wisdom with which to shape that flock – love, rock, keys. The church and the world need them all.

There are 3 serious theological words just to mention. Stewardship, sacrifice and pledge:

- *All things come from you and of your own do we give you.* We are the stewards, the keepers of our time, money, energy, talents – **stewardship** is keeping the resources of our lives in order so that our lives and the lives of others can be abundant. It's setting priorities, making decisions, being responsible.
- And taking account of what is ours means counting the cost – and for Christians that generally means some sacrifice. **Sacrifice** is an offering to God. God at work in our lives gets to the heart of things and sacrifice usually costs us in some way.
- And when we know what we have, as good stewards, we offer it to God, as a **pledge** - a promise. It's not just throwing money at something, its being invested as a disciple, loving, giving, feeding Christ's sheep, responding to God's generous love.

When we give to the church as a response to God's generous love, we unlock imagination, creativity and hope in the Parochial Church Council – really we do!

- Together you can feed the flock here, nourish hearts and minds with the good news of Christ,
- You can be depended upon for young and old, for those in need,
- you can take your place as a force for good in this town in new ways, with others.

What seems like a sacrifice now, by the grace of God, becomes a blessing for all.

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