

HYMNS: **443** **“Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”**
 6 **“Father, we love you”**
 461 **“I, the Lord of sea and sky”**
 564 **“O thou who camest from above”**

READINGS: Psalm 130
 John 21:15-19

“Do you love me?”

I haven't preached from this pulpit for a long time. It's nice to be back, but before I begin, I need to preface my sermon with a word about where I am as a student for the Methodist ministry. Many of you know already that I am training to be a Methodist minister. Chris Jackson is with us this morning. Stand up Chris. Chris and I are currently training at the same college in Birmingham. I'm sure that you have met him already. Chris has been on his placement with us. His presence has been a blessing to all of us. He has been everywhere, every corner of the chapel. He's even worked with our choir and we'll be hearing them later on.

It is very exciting, but at the same time, very nerve-wracking to preach before your friends or family. I feel this morning as if I am preaching to my friends and family. But, more than these feelings, I am actually very happy as this is an opportunity to share with you how my first year's training has been and a few things that I have learned so far in training.

“Do you love me?” is the title of my sermon this morning.

Let me begin with a simple story.

There was a couple recently married. When all the ceremonies and the receptions were over, when at last they were on their own, the wife asked her husband, “Darling, do you really love me?” The husband whispered. “Of course, I do. I love you so much. I'd give my life for you, I'd even die for love of you.” The wife smiled at her husband and said to him. “Darling, you don't have to die, just tell me that you will wash the dishes. That will be quite enough.”

There are moments in life when we are in trouble because of the things we have done or haven't done. These crises make us upset or embarrassed or ashamed or even helpless. When we are filled with these mixed feelings, we quite often find that language simply cannot express the way we feel.

My nearly four years' of married life tells me that cooking or a smell of cooking in the house is generally a good sign especially if you're in trouble and locked out in the doghouse. Sometimes it is more effective way of communication than thousands of words. It is a peaceful gesture and an open invitation for the peace talk around the dinner table.

John, in his Gospel, reported a similar situation, this time between Jesus and His disciples. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples including Peter whilst they were fishing on a boat. The disciples must have panicked when they saw Jesus, because they all had abandoned and betrayed him previously. Peter even jumped into the lake when he heard it was Jesus.

Jesus, without saying much, cooked breakfast for them. He cooked some fish on a charcoal fire. The smell of the grilled fish must have been all over the place.

This must have been a relief for the disciples that the smell of the barbequed fish must have calmed down their anxiety and guilt, replacing them with the excitement or even joy of seeing Jesus their Lord again. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved Him? And three times Peter replied that he did love Him.

Over many centuries, this recorded conversation between Jesus and Peter has inspired many Christians to follow Jesus. Calling for ministry and for pastoral care is a strong feature in the conversation, especially in Jesus' commands, "feed my lambs" and "tend my sheep".

Jesus called Peter to follow him.

And Jesus is still calling us the readers of the Bible to follow him.

If we were there or even if we were Peter and Jesus was calling us to follow him, what would our response be?

My instant response would be this. "Jesus, are you sure you've got the right person? Do you think that I can do well in ministry?"

I actually started this year's training asking the same question; what more can I learn and how can I be a better person to serve the church as a minister? More practically, how can I communicate better with people in English?

It has been six years since I came to Wesley's Chapel. For those of you who knew me then, may well remember that I had very little English. I remember the day when I stood in front of the lectern, reading a biblical lesson in the service here at the chapel. Leslie introduced me to you and announced that I was going to read in English for the first time in public. Wesley's Chapel has been my church, my home, my work place, and my English language school. And all of you have been my English teachers. That means that any mistakes I make are down to you, your fault, and you must work harder if I don't speak English well.

I feel that there seems to be no end of my battle with the English language.

Let me give you a simple example.

My first essay written in English failed to pass. It was when I was doing my MA study at Wesley House, Cambridge. The essay was about models of pastoral care from the Bible. I really worked hard on my essay, and I couldn't understand why it didn't pass. Later on I realized that every time I used the word, 'message', I spelled it with an 'a'

instead of an 'e'. So unfortunately, whenever I intended to say 'Jesus' message', it read as 'Jesus' massage'.

This is only one example. I could give you so many more if I had time.

Going back to the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, when we look at their conversation carefully, we realise that all Jesus was asking for Peter at the moment of his calling was whether Peter loved him. The conversation was not to blame him on his betrayal or to assess how well prepared Peter was for tending or feeding lambs and sheep, in real life, God's own people. One thing Jesus asked was whether Peter loved him. Jesus asked, "Peter son of John do you love me?" And he asked this three times.

Why did he repeat his questions three times? Wouldn't one or perhaps two have been enough? It might be worth checking the actual words written in Greek.

In the Greek of the New Testament, there are three words for love: *eros*, *philos*, and *agape*. *Eros* usually refers to physical love, but more precisely self-satisfying love. *Philos* is brotherly love, and *agape*, generally known as divine love, is self-giving love.

Jesus came to Peter and asked three times 'do you love me?' Interestingly John, the writer of this Gospel who usually was very careful in choosing a word, used different Greek words to translate "love" and he did so in a very interesting way.

Jesus uses the word *agape* when he asks Peter for the first and the second time.
"Do you love me?" (the word he uses is *agape*)
Second time, "do you love me? (*agape* again)"
Peter replies "Yes, I love you (his word is *philos*, not *agape*)"
Second time, "You know I love you (*philos* again)"

But when he asks the question for the third time Jesus changes from *agape* to *Philos*.

"Do you really love me? (*Philos*, this time)"
Peter replies "You know I love you (still *philos*)"

It is hard to see a logical reason for this. John didn't give any clear reasons to explain it. We can only guess and try our best. It might help us to understand if we add the different meanings of the Greek words into the conversation.

Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me in the way I love you?" (that's *agape*)
Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you in the same way as I love my brother." (*philos*, this time)
"Do you love me in the way I love you?" Jesus asked again. (*agape*)
"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you as my brother." Peter replied. (there, it is again *philos*)
Jesus then asked for the last time, "Do you love me in a way you love your brother?" (*philos*, note the change to *philos*)
Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you as my brother." (*philos*)

There's no doubt that Jesus wants us to love in the way he loves. But, like Peter we may find ourselves unable to respond with his kind of love, with agape. That might make us feel hurt, just as Peter did, worried that we are not ready to follow Jesus, because we seem only able to love others within our own limitations. *Philos* is all we can usually manage.

But, Jesus' calling and his love are not conditional. He will accept our love even though it is not as high as, or as pure as agape. That's how he accepted Peter's love – at the level of Peter's understanding.

We have many stained glass windows here at Wesley's Chapel. One of my favourites is the memorial window for those who died in the First World War. It's over there. That one! It shows the risen Christ holding a young soldier in a loving embrace. The meaning of this struck home a couple of years ago when we heard that one of our own members, Apete Tuisovurua Fijian serving in the British army, had been killed in Afghanistan. That made the inscription that appears on the window truly moving – "greater love hath no man than this", and we can all complete the quotation. It's from John's Gospel. Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.

We must know that God's calling is a high calling.

God never wants us to settle in our comfort zones. Even in our troubles, God is calling us to a higher and a deeper level of love. He asks, "Do you love me (*agape*)?" Even when our response is *Philos*, he's always urging us to something even better and higher and more noble. His calling challenges us to change and grow. But, at the same time, God never undermines what we have to offer him. He calls us to come just as we are now, in the present time.

This is one of the lessons that I have learnt so far this year. Rather than being anxious about what I don't yet have to offer, I simply want to bring the experiences, gifts and love that God has already blessed me with into the calling for ministry, and pray that I will continue to learn and grow.

My own response to Jesus' question, "Yes, Jesus I love you, although my love is so limited and small compared to your love. But Lord, you know that I do love you."

This is all that Jesus is asking of me.
And it's all that Jesus is asking of you.

May God help us continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.