

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Peter Cornick on 5th May, 2019, at the Kreuzkirche, Leipzig. Hinde Street and the Kreuzkirche, both Methodist Churches, have formed a partnership since the mid-1980s. Both congregations have visited each other over 30 years and kept one another in their prayers. 35 members of Hinde Street visited Leipzig from 3rd – 6th May 2019.

Do you love me? Relationship and building the body of Christ.

John 21: 1-19

Dear friends, it is a great privilege to address you today, as I make my first visit to Leipzig and to the Kreuzkirche. I am grateful to you Pastor Friedbert and to you all for your warm welcome, and your hospitality.

I bring greetings in the name of the risen Christ, from all the congregation at Hinde Street. The relationship between our two churches has lasted for over 30 years. It is built on friendship, trust, and a desire to build unity and peace, between people of differing countries and languages. As such, it is a model for our Christian living. Christ's risen body is no longer bound to a specific time and place, Palestine in the first century, but present to people of every nation and language across the world. Thank you, to both churches, for your part in developing that relationship and that living body of Christ.

Relationships can only develop with trust and with shared experience. I feel a profound sadness, that the Brexit process in the UK, has left the UK looking as if we want to break relationships with our European neighbours. Brexit has sown division, not only between Britain and our European partners, but in Britain itself. At home, there is now a toxic political environment. Those who seek to divide our communities, have seized their opportunity. It is a dangerous time. When we, as European neighbours, need to be working together to tackle climate change, global insecurity, the rise of the far right, and the mass movements of refugees across all of Europe, Brexit makes no sense.

The original European project was founded on a desire for peace and co-operation amongst the European nations. Peace and co-operation formed a major part of the original campaign in Britain to join the EEC. To our shame, peace and co-operation were not even mentioned in the more recent referendum. I feel profoundly sad, at the negative image being portrayed of Britain to the rest of Europe.

In these challenging times for Europeans, a relationship such as we have as churches, developed over many years, and based on being the body of Christ, stretching across the artificial boundaries made by humans, is as important as it ever was. Your visitors from Hinde Street feel European, treasure this relationship, and in this moment of our trial, feel our need for your solidarity with us.

Developing relationship, and developing the body of Christ, is at the heart of the exchange between Peter and Jesus.

It is some time after 'these things'; the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the garden, in the locked room and to Thomas. Peter and six other disciples have gone fishing. They have returned to what they know best – their jobs before they ever met Jesus. Having been called

by the Jesus of Galilee from their fishing, to a life of following him in his teaching and healing, they are now called to follow him – the crucified and risen Christ.

For Peter, he was once called to leave his nets. And he followed. Until that is, the denial. Three times Peter says: 'I do not know that man.' Now, casting his nets on the right side of the boat, Peter catches such a huge trawl of fish, he believes and wades through the sea to meet Jesus – to meet his risen Lord.

But Jesus has not forgotten the denial. The denial of relationship – the denial of a friend. Denial, three times. For the risen Jesus, his purpose is in reconciling this relationship. Three times he asks:

'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?'

'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'

'Feed my lambs.'

'Simon son of John, do you love me?'

'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'

'Tend my sheep.'

'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.'

'Feed my sheep.'

Much has been written about these three questions of Jesus, and Peter's three responses, not least about the word 'love'. There are two words used here for love. Not everyone agrees that there is any significance in which word is used. I would suggest there is.

The first two times that Jesus asks Peter, 'do you love me', Jesus uses the word 'agape' to mean love.

Agape: to love with respect and esteem; an un-conditional love which desires the best for someone. In Christianity, this is the kind of love Christ shows.

You might expect Peter to reply, saying that he loves Jesus in the same way – agape. But he doesn't.

Peter's first two replies, 'you know that I love you,' are each using the word 'philia.'

Philia: to love one's brother – or sister – as a friend.

So, perhaps Peter doesn't understand what Jesus is asking. And even these responses by Peter are evasive. 'Surely you know that I love you' – 'why ask?', he seems to say. Does Peter realise he is being tested? Does he remember he has denied Jesus only days before?

Now, for the third time, Peter is asked by Jesus, 'do you love me?' Only this time, Jesus changes the word for 'love'; Jesus uses 'philia'. The very word Peter has used in his reply on two occasions before.

Do you love me as a friend?

Is this why Peter feels so hurt on the third occasion? Hasn't he just told Jesus he loves him as a friend? Why is Jesus pressing this questioning?

Angrily, he retorts: 'you know that I love you.' 'As a friend!'

Perhaps from this exchange, we can see how, having denied Jesus three times, Peter is broken when asked three times, do you love me? Perhaps we see how Peter is utterly dependent on Jesus' un-conditional love – his 'agape' – to redeem him. Once again, we see how it is not that we have first loved God, but that God has first loved us.

And by this un-conditional love for Peter, a broken sinner, the risen Christ restores relationship and binds up the wounds. And to the broken sinner who has just received this un-conditional love, this 'agape', this 'grace', the risen Jesus calls him to 'feed my sheep.' He calls Peter to build up the body of the church. To build up relationship in the name of the risen Christ. Which is exactly our task.

As the Psalmist sings in Psalm 30:

*You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.*

Only from a recognition of each other's vulnerability, when we are fishing, and are catching little, only from a recognition of having denied Jesus and each other, only from a recognition of our utter reliance on God, can we too, build peace, unity, reconciliation, trust and relationship in challenging times.

Only from a recognition that the call of God comes, through the crucified and risen Christ, calling us to love him, can we, together, build up the body of Christ.

Rev. Peter Cornick

