

Holy Trinity, Hereford 7pm

18/3/19

Series on Saints. People remarkably free of human weakness? Surely not.

Reason for choosing Peter. Human. Inspired by him and encouraged by him too. What a remarkable man St Peter is. All human life is there in this one flawed, passionate, impulsive, cowardly but courageous, forgiven human being. Every time we meet him in the bible, we can be both encouraged and challenged.

He was the rock on which Jesus was to build his church, but a pretty shaky rock he was.

He was part of Jesus' inner circle; an enthusiastic follower; the first to preach Christ to the Gentiles; then he was one of the first to the tomb of Jesus after the women had brought news of it being empty.

Look at five different bible passages, four of them quite quickly, and then one for longer.

1: John1: 35-42

2: Mark 1: 16F

3: Matthew 16: 13-20. The first to see who Jesus was. The rock on which the church was built.

4: Matthew 26: 31-35, 69-75. Denial of Jesus.

5: John 21: 15-22. The restoration of Peter.

Here he is today, after Jesus' resurrection, back fishing with his fellow disciples; Jesus has helped them with a miraculous catch of fish and has had breakfast with them. And then it's time for a conversation between Jesus and Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?", and three times Peter assures Jesus that indeed he does love him.

Now there's uncertainty about some of the details – do you love me more than these: does it mean more than you love these others, or more than they love me, or more than you love all this way of life as fisherman?

And does it matter that there are different emphases in the words for love used by Jesus and Peter, with Peter unable to offer the higher love for which Jesus asks?

It's unclear, but what really matters is whether Peter loves Jesus.

Three times Peter is asked if he loves Jesus – echoing the three times Peter has denied Jesus – no wonder that's painful for Peter. And three times Jesus tells him to feed his sheep. This is going to cost everything, and it's as a martyr that Peter will glorify God.

The love precedes the feeding; the relationship precedes the ministry. It's not, if you can get on with doing all this, then you will love me. The ministry flows from the love, not the other way around.

"If you love me," says Jesus, "You will keep my commandments." Put it the wrong way round and discipleship and ministry are self-righteousness and joyless.

In the memorable words of St Paul, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

But is putting love first a bit soft? Hardly, Peter was going to end up on a cross. William Temple describes St Peter as a "spring of encouragement to most of us". Writing of this passage, Temple says, "The example of Paul is of little use to me; I am not a hero. The example of John is of but little more use; my love is so feeble. But Peter is a source of constant encouragement, for his weakness is so manifest, yet because he was truly the friend of his Lord, he became the Prince of the Apostles and glorified God by his death."

Jesus says, "Do you love me?" and Peter replies, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

And then of course from there Peter's ministry as an apostle continues. Just one reading from Peter's Epistle. 1 Peter 2: 4-5. Living stones.

We can see Peter as outgoing, good company, challenging, but willing to learn. He also encourages us to acknowledge our humanity, but also to pray for an increase in our faith and loyalty to Christ.