

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
April 18, 2010  
10 am Liturgy**

**This post-resurrection appearance has always struck me as one of the most tender and yet troubling ones in any of the gospels. The tender part most of us can understand. Which of us would not enjoy the simplicity and directness of sunrise on a beach with Chef Jesus? (Mind you I've never actually had barbecued fish for breakfast. Smoked salmon on occasion is as adventurous as I get, I'm afraid.)**

**This beach scene is sort of like the first movement of the grand two-movement symphony that constitutes this appendix to John's Gospel. It cuts through all theological discussion, all amazement, and all doubts. It is simply the Master whom they knew so well and loved—most of the time—sharing yet another simple meal with them. It is a tender and simple manifestation of God's on-going love for them. Comfy and cozy!**

**But then the second movement begins. This is a more intimate conversation between just two of them: Jesus and Simon. Notice that John's gospel does not have Jesus use the name he gave Simon himself, Peter, the rock. He uses Simon's original name**

again. It's almost like John is saying this Peter is not yet a full disciple, a full apostle. Not until after Jesus and he chat a bit.

And Jesus asks a rather troublesome, some might even say terrifying series of questions. What was going through their minds—both of them? I wonder. Can you remember when you first asked someone else whether they loved you? Did you ever have to ask? Why? Didn't you just "know"?

Or can you remember ever having been asked the question by someone else? "Do you love me? More than these"? What did you feel? Did he/she really "have" to ask outright? This gets embarrassing. It's bad enough once, but three times? What was going through their minds—both of them?

And what do we make—if anything—from the continual shift of vocabulary throughout the questions. Jesus first asks if Simon loves him using the classic, Christian verb *agapeo*, the word that means "do you love me as a good Christian should"? But Jesus' last question uses a different word for "love." That word is "*phileo*," meaning the deep love of a profound and very personal friendship.

And other words change throughout as well. There are both sheep and little lambs. Why? Jesus exhorts Simon to both care for,

shepherd, and feed them. Which is it to be? Both? All of the above? And why?

Whoever wrote this appendix was either just trying to show-off his new-found vocabulary skills (like he had just graduated from the Sylvan Learning Center's new writing school), or he has a rather complex and profound hint in mind for the reader.

I'm suggesting, I guess, that it is the latter. At least it's worth considering. Rather like a Beethoven or Mozart, John's second movement is not divorced from melodies in the first movement.

Before Peter is commissioned again as the chief shepherd of the new flock, John wants to make sure that the love he feels is always as warm and tender as the breakfast scene of a few minutes previous. Jesus wants a shift in Simon. A shift from a dutiful, Christian discipleship kind of love, to a profoundly personal, friendship kind of love. Both kinds of love are good, of course, but Jesus wants to have and maintain a very personal bond, a bond that is warm and tender and very, very personal.

Despite what some of the good Jews thought down through the centuries, and despite what most contemporaries of Simon and Jesus thought at the time, and despite what you and I might have

been taught growing up, this is the kind of relationship God wants with all of us. (It's reminiscent of the title of one of Fr. Bill Barry's recent books: *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace*.) This is the God Jesus reveals in his own flesh and blood. A God of warmth and tenderness, a God who treasures friendship more than we will ever know.

I said at the outset that this was a troublesome movement in the symphony. It is sometimes also terrifying--at least to me. For whatever bizarre reason, I am actually more comfortable most of the time with a God in the distance. A God who cares and loves, of course, but with whom I do not share beaches and fish-fries. Like Greta Garbo of ancient film fame, most often I "*vant* to be alone." It's crazy, I know. But it seems safer somehow.

Yet God seems to "*vant*" something quite different. It is not for nothing that Francis Thompson calls God "the hound of heaven." And the symphony is playing at a local symphony hall near you. In fact, it's playing again this morning right here. Peace!