

## Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Rt Rev Colin Sinclair

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### Follow me – recommissioned for service – John 21:1-19

This story contains a wonderful, liberating, hope-filled truth: *Failure is an event, not a destiny.* After a night of denial comes a morning of grace. This is good news for all of us because we all fail sooner or later. Failure doesn't mean you have lost it all. It means you have some hard lessons to learn. *Only those who have greatly failed will truly appreciate this story.*

When we have failed those we love the most, our mind becomes a swirl of emotions—Embarrassment . . . Anger . . . Fear . . . Shame . . . Despair. *We feel unworthy because we acted so foolishly.* When we have hurt someone deeply, we want to know if they still love us or is it too late? Will they ever forgive me? Can I ever forgive myself? *As long as he lived, Peter never forgot that terrible night when he denied Jesus.* But thank God, Jesus did not give up on Peter.

On Easter Day he sent a message. The angel at the tomb instructed the women to “Go, tell his disciples and Peter”. When failure had separated him, from his friends, Jesus sought him out. *Wherever he was that weekend, he must have felt utterly alone* as he replayed those awful moments “Why? Why did I do it? What made me think I was so much better than the others? How could I have been so foolish?” “What will Jesus think of me now?” To answer that Jesus made a special appearance to Peter sometime on Easter Sunday. *We don't know where or when precisely nor do we know how long the meeting lasted.* But twice the New Testament mentions that the meeting took place: Luke records “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.”. And Paul wrote “He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.” Jesus met with Peter before he met with the rest of the disciples. What amazing grace. Jesus comes after Peter and doesn't wait for him to make the first move.

In John 21 the followers of Jesus are back home on the Sea of Galilee. Peter and six of his friends have spent the night fishing fruitlessly. At dawn a stranger calls from the shore, telling them to put their nets on the other side of the boat to catch fish. They respond and end up with so many (153) , they struggle to haul the full net in. It is the abundance of grace seen in changing water to wine at Cana, in feeding 5000 with loaves and fish. John realizes it

is Jesus. Peter impulsively jumps in the water fully dressed and swims for shore. The others land the catch and all find Jesus has breakfast waiting for them.

After breakfast was over, Peter and Jesus started talking together around the fire (v. 9). It was a charcoal fire, mentioned in only one other place, the high Priest's courtyard where Peter denied the Lord.

By one fire Peter says, "I don't know him." By another fire he says, "Lord, you know I love you." By one fire he denied Christ; by another he is restored by Christ.

"Why did Jesus ask Peter three times, "Do you love me?" "Because Peter had denied him three times". "Why did he do this publicly?" "Because Peter denied him publicly". Did the other disciples need to hear Peter openly declare his love for Christ to dispel any doubts about where Peter stood?

Jesus' first question- "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" was a subtle reminder of his previous boast to be more loyal than the others. A chastened Peter answers now *declaring his love for Christ, but refusing to compare himself with anyone else*. Jesus is cleaning the wound so that it might be properly healed. He is getting rid of Peter's guilt and shame by dealing with it openly.

Jesus doesn't try to make Peter feel guilty. He doesn't humiliate him. He is not outraged at Peter, unlike many who are outraged at so much today. He doesn't ask him, "Are you sorry for what you did?" He doesn't make him promise to do better. *Once we have hurt someone we love, it is hard to look them in the face and it is harder still to be questioned about our true commitment*. "How could you have done that? What were you thinking?"

He just asks one very intimate question: "Do you love me?" The questions must be asked and the answers must be given if he is to be truly restored. *Without the pain, he would not get better*. It is true that "The truth will set you free but it sometimes it will hurt you first."

There are three qualifications for those who would serve the Lord: the first is love; the second is love and the third is love. Activity can never replace intimacy; busyness can never be a substitute for trust.

When Christ asks the question the third time, Peter's heart is grieved and he blurts out, "Lord, you know all things." Search my heart and see the truth.

It worked. The painful surgery produced the desired healing. *Peter never denied Christ again.*

A few weeks later, on the Day of Pentecost, fully restored, he stood in the temple courts and preached to the very people who had crucified the Lord. Three thousand people's lives were changed that day. The old Peter was gone forever. A new man was born when Jesus restored his fallen disciple and what adventures now lay ahead.

Now comes the recommissioning. The call "Follow me" are not just among the first words in the gospels but also among the last. It is a call for love to be shown in loyalty, and faith in Jesus demonstrated by faithfulness. In-between the two calls lies three years' actual experience of what following means.

Peter took his second chance and accepts his commission to be now simply a fisherman but also a shepherd to the flock, and was faithful to his calling until his death. The way ahead for him would be cross-shaped.

Jesus redeems failure! He gets rid of our idealised self-image of who we are and gives us a new vision of himself. If he is able to forget our past. Why can't we?

Peter remains a figure of surpassing interest. We can't get enough of him. *We know him well because we see him every morning when we look in the mirror.* His story is our story.

The process of Christian growth is long and painful, with many ups and downs. It took repeated failure to produce rock-solid character in him. But Jesus never gave up on him. *From beginning to end, Jesus believed in Peter more than Peter believed in himself.*

Suppose however this is not just a word to us personally but a word to our Church now. So that our Church and Peter-type congregations would know that though we fall again and again, by God's grace we can keep on getting back up. What mercy! What grace! Perhaps God has still another chapter or more to write through our Church of Scotland that will impact our land and maybe even beyond that. If so perhaps we need to respond by saying this "We may not love you with the love we ought, nor with the love you call for or deserve; nor with the love you have shown us, but Lord, we are yours, and this we want to be." May God, in his grace, help us and our Church to keep on following Jesus.