

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 17th 2013

In the Gospel Jesus rather solemnly asks Peter three times whether he loves him. Peter gives the obvious and simple answer, not sounding the depth of what Jesus is asking him and asking of him.

Each of Christ's responses to Peter seems to go in a different direction than his question does, asking Peter for something not apparently or immediately aimed at himself: "Feed My lambs," "tend My sheep," and "feed My sheep." The lambs are the little ones, the most needful and clueless, but the sheep, the adults, have their own need to be shepherded. And we are both those lambs and those sheep, at the same time as we are Peter.

We desperately need the care only our Shepherd can give us, but the Lord does his work in many ways --- directly himself when we pray to him, in the love that the Father lavishes on us, in the sprightly presence of the Spirit that quickens us. But there is more.

Christ asks us the same fundamental question that he asks Peter: do we really love him? If we do, then we need to feed those around us, not only with table food but with a truly personal interest in who the brothers and sisters are whom Jesus has put in our lives; we nourish them with our listening, with remembering what they tell us of what is in their hearts, with every way available to us of making them feel safe, understood, and cherished. We need to tend to their needs in a personal way, not just in politeness or in sending money, not only at a distance or impersonally.

And we need to do this on the basis of our desire to be, like Peter, first a disciple (one who learns from the Lord) and then an apostle (one whom the Lord sends in his Name and with his power). This can sometimes demand from us real discernment about what really constitutes love for others, and it might lead to us occasionally showing true "tough love," difficult both for us and for those we care for, but Jesus is not going to ask us to do this loving alone....

Do we love Jesus? Then we must feed and tend his sheep as best we can... in, with, and through the Lord.

Chas Kestermeier, S.J.