

## **Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 18th 2018**

There are just two charcoal fires in the whole Bible, and they are both in the Gospel of John. The first is mentioned at John 18:18, the charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard around which the slaves and guards warmed themselves when the gatekeeper says to Peter, "You are not one of this man's disciples are you?" and Peter says, "I am not." Questioned like that two more times, Peter, now warming himself at the same fire, denies being a disciple of Jesus two more times.

The second charcoal fire is the one on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius (the Sea of Galilee, renamed for the current emperor), apparently prepared by the risen Lord Jesus (21:9), which sets the scene for today's Gospel reading, where the same Peter is questioned three times by Jesus, "Do you love me?" and the disciple now affirms his allegiance three times. So in one place a charcoal fire is the setting for a threefold denial of discipleship, and in the other place a charcoal fire is the setting for a threefold affirmation of discipleship. A coincidence? I think not. The evangelist John uses that detail to help us link those episodes together. And who is to say that the association does not go back to Jesus himself, helping Peter to realize that the denier is being given a fresh start in his relationship to the Lord.

And this seaside scenario is not only a matter of astounding forgiveness; it is also a commissioning: "Feed my lambs; feed my sheep." The Good Shepherd is enlisting this errant sheep in the Master's own work of shepherding. Peter is given an opportunity to demonstrate the love he professed by sharing in the mission of the risen Lord. Ultimately, it is going to be a matter of being led where he does not want to go. Loving the head shepherd will entail following him even to a death like his. But he need not fear. The Lord stands there full of risen life, a life Peter can also share already in the act of following.

In our own small way, each of us who claims to be a disciple of Jesus is invited into that same act of trust, as people forgiven and assigned our particular task.

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