

ON THE BEACH

What is love anyway?

Sometimes in life you have those moments when something suddenly becomes clear in a way it never has been before. I had one of those moments during my counselling training. As part of the training, and once you are qualified as a counsellor, it is required that you have a supervisor. Supervision is there to hold a counsellor accountable and for the growth and development as a counsellor. In one supervision session I was presented with a sudden moment of clarity that stopped me in my tracks.

Many people have described me as competitive, and in some ways, I am. But in a supervision session, my supervisor, in response to how I was describing my counselling work said these words: "Ian, you live your life as a comparison." Boom! There it was. A deep truth that I'd never seen or understood before.

As I reflected on those words, I realised just how much of my life had been lived as a comparison with me constantly comparing myself to others, and mostly coming off worse. Maybe you know what that's like – it can be very daunting. It raises this question for me, and maybe for you too: I might live by comparing myself to others, but is that the way God sees my life?

There are some details in the bible that I sometimes look at and wonder why on earth they are there.

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee.^[a] It happened this way:² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus^[b]), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.^[c] ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus Reinstates Peter

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.

(John 21 v 1-17)

After fishing all night only to catch nothing, the disciples follow Jesus' instructions and net the catch of their lives. Isn't it enough for us to know

that? (This was the catch of their lives?) Isn't it enough for us to know that their net was so full of fish they struggled to haul it in? Why is it then we are told they caught precisely 153 fish? Presumably, if nothing else, it means someone actually counted how many fish they caught and recorded it!

There has been lots of speculation about the significance of the number 153. Some say there were 153 languages spoken in the world at the time. Some say there were 153 different kinds of fish in the Sea of Galilee. More probably it's simply the number of fish they caught. And maybe something important Jesus wanted to make clear to Peter and the other disciples.

Jesus had come to the beach to meet with the disciples, but perhaps to meet especially with Peter. I don't know for sure, but my best guess is that the moment Peter heard John say; "It's the Lord!" his heart began to race. He leapt out of the boat in excitement as he rushed to meet the stranger on the shore. But how long do you suppose before his heart was racing with big questions about what Jesus was thinking about him? Peter, after all, had been the one who had denied Jesus and abandoned him in his hour of need.

Around the fire, eating breakfast, not even Peter had dared ask the questions running through his mind as he was confronted with the truth about himself and Jesus. And then, after breakfast, Jesus pops the questions to Peter that will change his life again. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21 v 15) And here's my question: to what or who is Jesus referring when he asks, "Do you love me more than these?"

Mostly we assume that Jesus is referring here to the other disciples. In some ways that might make logical sense, as Peter had perhaps been the one who had openly committed his loyalty to Jesus in the past. But...but...Peter has also been the disciple who had dramatically let Jesus down in his hour of need, and the question then seems to be: would Jesus really ask Peter to compare himself to the other disciples? Would Jesus seek to get Peter to compare himself favourably against the other disciples when he was the one who failed? Is comparing ourselves to others really the kind of thing that Jesus would be encouraging any of us to do? And here's a thought: how on earth would Peter know if he loved Jesus more than the other disciples? How can anyone know how much someone else loves God? Perhaps, in truth, sadly, we are very quick to make judgement about how much others do or don't, love God. But, how can we know? How can anyone know?

Would Jesus really be asking Peter to make a judgement about whether or not he loved him more than the other disciples when Jesus understood he couldn't know?

Well, maybe it's possible Jesus was referring to the other disciples when he asked: "Do you love me more than these?" But I'm not so sure.

If I ask the question: "Does God want me to compare myself to others?" I think the answer is no. I can tell you that living life as a comparison can be very destructive. It can lead to the belief that I am nothing but a failure. It can lead to pride because, I am, simply better than everyone else. And, for me, it is a constant battle: do I live in the perspective of how I see myself when I compare myself to others, or do I live in the truth about how God sees me?

Jesus was about to change the way Peter saw himself and invite him to live as God sees him.

So, if Jesus wasn't referring to the disciples, to what was he referring? Geoff Lucas suggest Jesus may have been referring to the fish. The fish..... seriously? Perhaps the question Jesus asks is not so much: Do you love me more than the other disciples? – something Peter cannot know, but more: Do you love me more than fishing? Fishing is something he does know. Perhaps the question is more: Peter is your love for me real? Or perhaps: Peter, where's your heart?

Peter had been a fisherman before he met Jesus – a relatively safe predictable life. He's spent three years following Jesus, three years where life was unpredictable and maybe not even safe. Would Peter be tempted to choose the safe, predictable life of fishing over an unpredictable and perhaps unsafe life following the risen Jesus?

Well friends, which would you choose?

Would you choose a safe, predictable, perhaps even comfortable life over following the risen Jesus? And Jesus asks the question to 'Simon, son of John' not to Peter! Simon was the name he had before he met Jesus, who gave him the name Peter – the rock and follower of Jesus. Is this Jesus' way of asking him to choose between his old life fishing, or his new life following Jesus? And, perhaps, it was a gentle reminder of the moment, on the beach, when Jesus had first invited Peter to follow him. Mathew records Jesus words this way: "Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people."

Jesus, on the beach, perhaps reinstates that invitation. He invites Peter to 'Feed my Lambs.' It's not fish anymore (John 21 v 15). Perhaps now Jesus is reminding Peter of all of the kingdom of the heavens he has tasted as Peter, follower of Jesus.

Why were we told there were 153 fish? Perhaps simply to emphasize the size of the miraculous catch, graciously given by Jesus himself. And, perhaps, Jesus was making clear that however many fish Peter caught, it would never be enough, not now he had tasted the kingdom of the heavens.

Friends, maybe that's why in the heart of followers of Jesus it is the recognition that the safe predictable, comfortable life will never satisfy. We have heard and seen the work of the kingdom of the heavens. Jesus is, perhaps, asking Peter to choose: How will you live? And, maybe, he's asking the same question to you.

There's lots of speculation about the different uses of the word Jesus uses for love, as he asks Peter: Do you love me? Perhaps more importantly, Jesus is asking Peter: Peter will you live for me?

How about you, friends?

Jesus asks Peter three times: "Do you love me?" There's lots of speculation too, about why Jesus asks Peter the same question three times. Some think it was because Peter denied Jesus three times, and this was a way of healing for Peter. Some suggest it was because in Middle Eastern culture to say something three times makes it legally binding. Maybe though, Jesus wanted to assure Peter that his love was bigger and better than anything Peter could do, and that it is this love Peter was welcomed to, valued in, and that God wanted to use him in the work of the kingdom of the heavens.

In a little bit, later in the conversation, Jesus will tell Peter there are tough times ahead. And, truth is, all human beings, all of us, need to know how deeply we are loved as we live for God and navigate the trials and challenges of this world. A conversation over a charcoal fire on the beach would be vital for Peter to remember as he lived to follow the stranger on the shore. Peter would need to know and remember that he was accepted, welcomed and deeply, deeply loved.

In those moments, during that conversation, Peter would know that he was trusted again, by the God who loved him deeply. By inviting Peter to feed his

sheep, Jesus is showing Peter how much he trusts him. Here's the beautiful, beautiful truth that is at work in this encounter: Jesus chooses Peter to feed his lambs in the full knowledge of everything he's done.

What does that truth speak into your heart today, friends?

Some of us may think we are unworthy of God's attention, love or grace. Some of us, perhaps because of something we've said or done, think we are unlovable. Some of us, maybe because we spend our lives comparing ourselves to others, think we are useless. Some of us may be full of shame, or regret and think that because of that God will simply pass us by. Some of us, maybe, think that our failure was simply too big and we've lost our opportunity with God.

Peter found that the truth about Jesus and the kingdom of the heavens is different, very different to the truth we sometimes think about ourselves. We don't know if there were other conversations between Peter and Jesus in which they worked out some difficult issues. If they happened, the Bible does not record them so, I'm guessing we don't need to know. What we do know, because we are told, is that Jesus invited Peter to live for him in the kingdom of the heavens and trusted Peter again.

In answer to Jesus third question 'Do you love me?' Peter declares that Jesus knows all things. Maybe knowing that, was, in the end, enough for Peter. It was enough to know that he lived in the deep and profound love of God, the one who would not condemn him, and whatever would happen in the future, that was the unshakeable truth.

Friends, we too are invited to live in that deep and profound love, the love of the one who will not condemn us. It was enough for Peter. Perhaps it is enough for us too, if we trust ourselves to it and the one who comes to meet us on the beach.

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