

Easter II 2021.

‘Line of Duty’ (St. John 21. 15 – 19)

Line of Duty.

So here we are, in the HQ of AC 12, the anti-corruption wing of the Police Force. It’s Sunday night in ‘*Line of Duty*’, the latest police drama and the air is full of intrigue. Sly glances are shared among the officers for a cloud of suspicion hovers over the whole force which is charged with rooting out bent coppers. The camera pans into the office of Superintendent Ted Hastings – the boss – who is talking to his trusty colleague Inspector Steve Arnott. This is not an interview situation in the glass box where two or three officers grill a suspect mercilessly with a formal recording. No. This is a discussion between two of the main and trusted characters. Nevertheless, Hastings is probing the reliability of his assistant in the light of unusual meetings which have been reported. How trustworthy is Arnott? Much will depend upon the answer. Hastings wants to support Arnott for another series so he does not hold back on a variety of probing but friendly questions.

St. John’s Gospel, Conclusion.

In our bible reading today, the Risen Lord takes Simon Peter aside to quiz him. Peter has been out fishing and the two have just had breakfast together. The other disciples are seated around the fire and Jesus takes Peter aside: the dodgy disciple. Here is a young man who has shown much promise but he is a hot-head. He picks fights when it is not necessary; he swears undying allegiance to Jesus one minute and then, at the trial, he denies Jesus three times. And the cock crowed.

So Jesus takes Peter aside and puts these three questions to him. He asks if Peter loves him. But in true Hastings fashion, each question is gently nuanced. Jesus uses two different Greek words for love: *agape*, meaning unconditional love and *philio* meaning friendship. Most translations gloss over this difference but St. John chooses his words precisely and for a purpose so I have used the J.B. Phillips translation because it makes clear the difference:

Jesus says twice to Peter, ‘*Do you love me with all your being*’? And Peter replies twice, ‘*You know that I am your friend, (I like you, we meet in the pub together on occasions)*’.

Jesus notes the distinction which Peter makes so he lowers the bar for the 3rd question and uses Peter’s word, *philio*, friendship. This gets Peter annoyed. He is ‘*deeply hurt*’. And why? Peter is honest. He doubts his ability to love his friend unconditionally and he has been rumbled.

Our Commitment.

Now I hope you will forgive me for this departure into biblical criticism. Perhaps it is self-indulgence on my part but what is being laid out before us is part of our human condition. How trustworthy can we be – in our job, our DIY, our marriage, our faith, our diligence in the garden? Hastings needs to know just where Arnott stands for the continuing of the operation. Now he knows. He has to make a decision. So it is with Jesus. Can Peter carry the next chapter of the gospel on his shoulders, given that his commitment is not total? We know the answer to that.

So what does Jesus do? He gives Peter a job! Jesus doesn't get the answer he wants but Peter's commitment will grow as he does a job. And as Peter answers the three questions, Jesus increases the responsibility that he expects from Peter: feeding lambs, caring for sheep, growing the whole flock.

We too are challenged in our discipleship by this passage. Where do you position yourself? Are we merely onlookers, well-wishers or do we express our commitment to the Risen Lord in some way? Yes, we are all followers – that is the last thing that Jesus says to Peter, *'Follow me!'* – but what else is the Risen Lord asking of us? Are we buttresses or pillars in our local church? What does it need for its further development? We will all have our views on that one but if we keep them to ourselves we will get nowhere together!

In this Easter season, people change. The confidence in the Risen Lord, the support of the Holy Spirit enables us to lift our commitment just a little. Peter's gaffs for the gospel fizzle out and he learns to carry the weight of the fledgling church on his shoulders precisely because he knew his weaknesses as well as gathering knowledge of his strengths.

Do I need to press the point further? No, the Holy Spirit, working in your heart will do that. Arnott will go back to his desk and suck his pencil; Hastings will pace up and down in his transparent office –but – please God - the show will go on. Amen.