

## **“THE GRAMMAR OF EASTER”**

*John 21:15-25*

Earlier this week we had an old friend to stay overnight. She’s recently retired as a primary school head teacher in London and the conversation around the dinner table soon turned to education and, as we are all of a similar age, it wasn’t long before the conversation took the usual “It was never like it in my day” route. I was reminded of the stuff I had to learn when I was at primary school which laid the foundation, I suppose, for my love of language and the way it works. We were pretty well drilled in the basics of English grammar and moved on to secondary school with a good grasp of tenses, moods, participles and so on, which has always stayed with me.

A couple of years ago we had a look at the Easter story from the point of view of punctuation – the question marks, the exclamation marks, the apparent full stop and so on. This year, I’d like us to consider further the grammar of the Easter story – in particular, the tenses. Some of you, I suspect (in fact, I don’t suspect, I can see) are starting to let your eyes glaze over and you’re anxious that we’re going to be delving into the original Greek again. Well, don’t worry: all that I’ve just said is a rather pretentious way of saying that we’re going to spend a few moments considering the Past, Present and Future implications of the Easter story, focussing especially on this episode with Peter at the end of John’s Gospel.

This isn’t quite the climax of John’s Gospel – that would have to be the resurrection itself – but it’s a pretty significant coda of the end of the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. This is clearly a little while after the resurrection itself as everyone has returned to Galilee and Peter and his colleagues have gone back to their fishing boats. As they toil unsuccessfully on the lake, Jesus appears as a distant figure on the shore and suggests a different tactic, which turns out to net them a huge number of large fish. At that point John recognises that it’s Jesus, and Peter dives into the water to swim to the shore and greet his Lord, who has not only helped them in their fishing, but cooked breakfast for them.

After the initial elation of their meeting, the encounter has the potential to turn awkward as it wasn’t that long ago that Peter let Jesus down in a fairly spectacular way, but Jesus’ response to him here – at a crucial point in the story of Jesus and of the Church, in which Peter is to play such a foundational part – is where we see these three tenses – Past, Present and Future – played out. Here we see Jesus almost formally handing over his mission to Peter: Peter who has been with him since the beginning of his ministry, Peter whose relationship with Jesus has been at times turbulent, Peter whom Jesus has already identified as the rock on which his Church will be built, Peter whose wholehearted commitment to Jesus and to the gospel of the Kingdom will begin the process that revolutionises the world. So let’s look at the grammar of this story.

### **1. THE PAST**

As we’ve already said, there’s a lot going on in this conversation – and there’s a lot of history and baggage to be sorted out. If you were going to turn this into a film, there would have to be a lot of flashbacks into the events of the last three years. This episode makes no sense without a knowledge of the past. Peter has never been the most consistent of disciples – or even of friends. He has argued with Jesus. He has misunderstood Jesus. He has misapplied Jesus’ teaching. He has let Jesus down by falling asleep when Jesus needed his prayerful support and running away when there looked to be a scrap on the horizon. He has lashed out in anger and frustration. And, most spectacularly, he has loudly and profanely declared that he has had nothing to do with Jesus as he has denied him in the High Priest’s courtyard.

Now here he is, sitting alongside Jesus in the morning sunshine, picking fishbones out of his teeth and wondering what’s coming next. Can you imagine how he must have felt talking to the man whom he had let down so clearly and unmistakably? But Jesus gives him the opportunity to declare his allegiance to him, to declare his love for him, even. And as Peter renews his devotion to his Master – three times, just

as he denied him three times – Jesus gives him a job to do. Jesus makes it clear that Peter is still a key part of his plan, he still has a crucial role to play in the development of the mission. The relief must have been immense!

Because, you see, *the past with Jesus means forgiveness*. It's all over and done with. It's time to move on. Peter has expressed his love for Jesus, he has renewed his commitment to him. Jesus knows that this impetuous, rough and ready fisherman is sorry. He could see that, no doubt, in Peter's tears outside the High Priest's house on the night before Good Friday. So Jesus forgives him. Now that the crucifixion and resurrection have taken place, forgiveness becomes a reality. Peter can make a new start. He can move on without the regrets and the guilt of the past dragging him down. I'd be prepared to bet that Peter's words and actions still came back to him on occasions in the future and he would probably squirm inwardly with embarrassment, but he would know that he was forgiven, that Jesus had put all that behind him and wanted him to move on.

One of the things that can often hamper our relationship with Jesus and can be an obstacle to our living with the joy and assurance that God wants for us, is our past. We wonder sometimes how Jesus could possibly want us to be part of his Kingdom, how he could possibly use us, with all that we've done, said and thought in the past. We wish we'd never done certain things. We shrivel with embarrassment when we think back to various situations in which we know we have let Jesus down – or situations that occurred before we ever got to know Jesus and we think that we could never really be free of the shame. But the Bible is clear, again and again, that we can know forgiveness, we can leave all that behind, because, in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, that is all dealt with. Just listen to these words – just a very small selection of the many promises about forgiveness and the amazing grace of God towards us:

*For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:11,12)*

*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)*

*In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. (Ephesians 1:7)*

*In Jesus we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:14)*

Those are promises from God – promises that mean when he forgives our sins they stay forgiven. All we need to do is accept that he does forgive us, accept that we can be renewed, accept that we can move on – and then leave it all with him. Let me ask you a question this morning: **Have you experienced God's forgiveness?** Are you able, with Jesus, to put the past behind you? If you haven't, then maybe this is the time to do it.

## **2. THE PRESENT**

So the past is dealt with. What does the present hold for Peter? Jesus isn't forgiving him and restoring him just for the sake of it – much as he loves him and wants the best for him. Peter is forgiven, the past is put behind him because of the present, and in the present Jesus has a task for Peter. Each time as Peter declares his commitment to Jesus, his love for him, Jesus commissions him to serve him. *The past with Jesus means forgiveness: the present with Jesus means service* – it means serving Jesus, participating in the great mission of the Kingdom. Peter is given the task of looking after Jesus' sheep and lambs.

We've already said, haven't we, that Peter has been identified as the foundational apostle, the one on whom Jesus' Church will be built. So this call to service is to look after, to tend, to pastor the people who will be brought into that church. Peter is given a responsibility to serve Jesus as the Church takes shape. He has been restored and renewed in this encounter with Jesus. The past has been dealt with and Peter can now move on into all that Jesus has planned for him. The present is just a continuing opportunity for service: and he has been resourced for that service by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has already set that in motion as he has appeared to all his disciples in the upstairs room after the resurrection. *John 20:22* reads, "And with that Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" The gift would be fully unwrapped at Pentecost, but Peter was already resourced for the service that Jesus had planned for him.

We can know forgiveness, as we've said. The past is dealt with. Our sins – our wrong choices, wrong decisions, wrong attitudes – have all been dealt with. But, just like Peter, we are not forgiven just for the sake of it. In our current culture we hear a lot of pretty loud voices telling us that all that matters is ourselves – "*Because you're worth it!*" Well, yes – you are worth it. God loves you to bits and he'd do anything for you, as he has proved in the death of Jesus. But he doesn't just save you for the sake of it. He saves you to serve him. You are saved, forgiven for a purpose. God loves you so much that he wants you to join him in the amazing mission of his Kingdom. He has stuff for you to get involved in in the present.

Just like Peter, you have been restored and renewed through what Jesus has done – and he continues to resource you through his Holy Spirit. Peter went all out for Jesus – he threw himself into the work of the Kingdom and eventually it consumed him. But he did it as someone who was forgiven, safe in his relationship with God, and commissioned to serve, to live for Jesus wherever he was and whatever he was doing (as we shall be thinking about at our Awayday in a couple of weeks time). What's more, he knew that it wasn't wasted effort. Remember these words from *1 Corinthians*? They were written in the context of Paul's teaching about the resurrection, about Easter: "*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain*" (*1 Corinthians 15:58*). Another question, then: **How is God calling you to serve him where you are now?**

### **3. THE FUTURE**

So, in the grammar of Easter, the past is forgiveness, the present is service – but what of the future? Jesus lets Peter know that although his past sins are dealt with and he is called to serve him in the present, the future is not necessarily going to go as he would like. In *vv18,19* he tells him that he will need help, he'll find himself at the mercy of others and be taken to places he'd rather not go – and eventually he will have to give up his life for the sake of the Gospel. It's not going to be easy, because the future will be uncertain.

But the future as uncertainty is not the grammar of Easter. That's something that is common to all humanity. For ourselves as Christians, and for all our fellow human beings, the truth is that we cannot know exactly what the future holds. Of course, we all have our plans, our ideas and ideals – but none of us can be completely sure what's going to be happening in our lives at four o'clock this afternoon, let alone in four months, four years, forty years time. So, if for no other reason, it might be a good idea to seek that forgiveness that God offers through Jesus.

There are two things that are constant here, though – two things that we can be sure of. The first follows on from the present as service. There is an imperative here (another bit of the verb, for those who are remotely interested in that kind of thing), the imperative – the command – to follow Jesus. This is John's Gospel, of course, but remember how often we have come across this in Matthew's Gospel, which we've been looking at in recent months? Those who are forgiven, those who have committed themselves to serve, are called to follow (*vv19,22*). Peter is called to follow without speculation, without trying to work

out everything that will happen. It's not up to him to decide how long he's got to do that, or worry about what the future holds for him.

And it's not up to him, either, to compare his lot with that of other disciples. John is walking along the shore with them and Peter is anxious to know what he's going to be doing, how long he's got. Jesus tells him that's none of his business: it's all to do with what Jesus wants to happen. Peter needn't waste his time and energy speculating about other people's relationship with Jesus, nor wondering about how he compares with them. It's all in Jesus' hands now.

Which leads us to the real point here. In the grammar of Easter, ***The past with Jesus means forgiveness: the present with Jesus means service: the future with Jesus means trust.*** Peter can trust Jesus, because he is going to return (v22). Jesus tells Peter that he's going to come back and put it all to rights. He will return as the victorious King and establish for ever the Kingdom he has inaugurated here on earth. (Of course, he doesn't say all that to Peter there and then, but it's clear from the rest of his teaching, from the rest of the Bible, that that is what is going to happen.) And because Jesus has kept his word about his death and resurrection, there is no need to doubt him on this either.

And in his parting words to the disciples as Matthew records them at the end of his Gospel, Jesus promises his presence at all times: "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" Peter can count on Jesus' help wherever he is – and he can count on his eternal presence beyond this life, too. That's why it's all worth it, why Paul wrote those words we've already quoted from *1 Corinthians 15:58*. Peter simply has to trust Jesus and, given all that has happened in Peter's life in the last few days, there's no reason at all not to trust Jesus.

As, indeed, is the case with us. We've just said that our future can seem very uncertain. We can't tell what's going to happen to us, but nevertheless Jesus calls us to serve him and to trust him. We need to make our plans responsibly, but leave them in his hands. And we need to focus on our service for him without constantly comparing ourselves – favourably or unfavourably – with others around us. If they are trusting in Jesus too, then we can be assured that he will be at work in their lives as well – but he will do that in his own way and in his own time. One day – and, again, we don't know when – Jesus will return and we'll be with him for ever. But until then, we trust him for his continuing presence and protection.

It's simple, but it's not necessarily easy. It takes a bit of faith – and that faith may waver at times. But if we are to live in the light of the forgiveness for past sins and continue to serve Jesus as he calls us in the present, then we need to trust him for the future.

***The past with Jesus means forgiveness: the present with Jesus means service: the future with Jesus means trust.*** A final question: Are you prepared to trust Jesus?

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. Jesus doesn't actually say that Peter is forgiven, so why should we make that assumption?
2. Is there any way we can be completely sure of forgiveness?
3. Peter is clearly called to service as a leader in the Church. What kinds of things does Jesus call us to do?
4. If the future is uncertain, why should we think Jesus can help?
5. What do you do when you feel your service for Jesus seems to be in vain? Can it ever be in vain?