DO YOU LOVE ME?

John 21:1-25

Key Verse: 15

“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’”

2023 has gone; 2024 has come. We are living in a time when things are so uncertain and rapidly changing. People wonder what will come this year and they become anxious and insecure. Yet, we thank God for giving us this new year, 2024. Time belongs to him and so do our lives. We believe that there is security, certainty, and hope in God. So in this New Year worship service, we want to listen to God and hear his words, particularly from John 21 so that we can have a very blessed year of 2024.

John 21 is the epilogue of this gospel of John. In chapter 20, we could see Mary’s confession after meeting the risen Jesus, “I have seen the Lord!” and Thomas’ confession, “My Lord and my God!” After this, John told us the purpose of writing John’s gospel that people may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and by believing they may have life in his name.” What a clear and outstanding conclusion! Then why did John write this epilogue? This epilogue excellently describes what Christian life is to be. In short it is to love Jesus because of his love for me. In the prologue John said, “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” (1:9) and then “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us…full of grace and truth.” In this epilogue, we see the risen Jesus full of grace and truth in his encounter with one man, Peter. We can say that the Word, the eternal God, became flesh to contact Peter so that he might have and live a life that is true and eternal. This relationship between Jesus and Peter is forever beautiful and shining as an example to each one’s personal relationship with Christ Jesus the Lord. Let’s see this.

Verse 1 says, “Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias.” This place had three names. The first two are Gennesaret Lake and the Sea of Galilee. Then the Romans renamed it to honour Tiberius Caesar, calling it the Sea of Tiberias. It is about 20km long, 11km wide, 220meter below sea level. Verses 2 and 3 say, "It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ‘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.” According to John’s gospel, even after seeing the risen Jesus two times, Simon Peter could not go to the mountain in Galilee according to Jesus’ instruction but to the sea. It was probably because Peter still thought that he was unworthy to carry out God’s mission as an ambassador of Christ. Interestingly, it says, “They got into the boat” not “a boat.” This must have been Peter’s old boat. He went back to his old fishing job. He was still the leader and other disciple buddies followed him. The author commented, “That night they caught nothing.” What a frustration! They had an empty net despite their professional skill and hard effort. Those who are called by Jesus only experience empty nets when they try to do something outside of him in disobedience to his word. Disobedience leads to failure.

Verse 4 says, “Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.” This Jesus is the God of hope. What a contrast between the dark night of despair of the empty net and early morning of new hope of Jesus! Peter failed in following Jesus and also was unsuccessful in doing his work in the world. It seemed that Peter had no place to go. Yet, early in the morning Jesus was standing there to help him, though Peter did not realize Jesus’ presence. This was the Jesus who had said to him when he was brought to Jesus, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas, Peter meaning rock” (Jn 1:42). We should never forget this Jesus, whenever we are at the verge of despair or giving-up spirit overshadows us.

Jesus called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” Jesus had to speak fairly loudly from the shore, for the boast was 90m away. Jesus called them “friends” in the NIV. In Matthew 26:50, Jesus called Judas “friend.” And in John 15:15, Jesus called his disciples “friends.” In all these three cases, the Greek words are different. And here in John 21:5, “friends” is in other translations, “children,” while in John 13 at the Last Supper Jesus called them “my chiildre” or “little children.” Here we see that the word contained some sense of distance, like calling them “guys”, losing intimacy. And “haven’t you any fish” is in NASB “…you do not have any fish, do you?” Probably, they didn’t want to hear an irritating comment as this. Yet, Jesus did so and they answered, “No.” Jesus made them confess that their net was empty with no fish caught at all. This was an important step for their restoration. After humble recognition of one’s failure or sin, restoration work can begin.

In verse 6, Jesus 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.” Surely, they must have tried the right and left side of the boat. And that time was early morning, not a time to fish. But when they obeyed Jesus at his divine voice, they experienced a great catch of fish. Peter must have been reminded of what had happened about three-and-half years prior. In Luke 5, after his teaching in the boat of Simon, Jesus said to him, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything but because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When Peter and his companions did so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break” (Lk 5:4-5). It is certain that when we obey the word of Jesus, there is restoration.

One Christian man’s ballpen business almost reached the point of bankruptcy because many competing companies of the same product arose. In that desperate situation, he came to God, repenting of his sin of not offering tithe, neglecting regular Bible reading and sincere Bible study, and not having a fervent prayer life. Then, while reading John 21, the words of God moved his heart. He had an idea to write on the ball pens of his company product, “momani 153” as the logo. He came to have a vision that everyone not only in his own country but in the world would use a ball pen of his company. At that time the world population was 4.5 billion. It turned out that 5 billion of the ball pen “monami” was produced and all were sold. It is true that there is restoration of any kind in Jesus through our obedience.

Then what happened? 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 (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. This act of Peter showed that Peter loved Jesus, despite his shame and guilt. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards (90 m). When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. What a sight! In the Bible, we never saw Jesus cooking. Now the risen Jesus in his glorified body cooked fish and bread on a fire of burning coals. Surely, he was the best chef in the world. They must have been just watching in awe and embarrassment. Then Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” Jesus wanted them to participate in this food preparation so that they might be less embarrassed. At this, Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. How strong Peter’s muscles were! Just before, the other six disciples had to tow the net. Now he, alone, dragged the net full of large fish, probably weighing over 150kg. Interestingly, John counted the large fish, 153, while they could not catch even one. John makes sure that this was not mystical, but actual with 153 fish. John commented that even with so many, the net was not torn. It was another miracle on top of catching the large number of fish. This is clearly what the risen Jesus did. This Jesus is the Lord of miracles. This miraculous and wonderous Lord Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” This Lord is also a tender and kind and delicate Lord. What a wonderful invitation of the Lord, “Come and breakfast”! None of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. The risen Christ sat down and had breakfast with his disciples. This is the love of Jesus that never fails. He is both the miracle maker and the cook, waiter, and diner with us and table companion. Peter’s heart must have melted in this love of Jesus. For Jesus did not punish him, but rather showed such a love for him. This was an unforgettable beach party, a love feast. Even after around 60 years, John remembered this event and associated this love feast at the beach with the heavenly feast and said in Revelation 3:20, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

The risen Lord prepares a love feast for his people in their lives. In 2016 when Ian and Jemmie established a house church, it was a sort of a beach party prepared by the Lord with many guests not only all over Canada but from Chicago. The bride and groom were full of thanks to the Lord. Since then there was no such a wedding in Toronto. We pray to see another one. In 2020, when Joshua and Paulina established a house church, it was another beautiful beach party prepared by the Lord. M. Sarah and myself made an adventurous trip to San Paulo, Brazil, when Covid-19 just broke out with the emergency state enforced in Toronto by the mayor. Not many people attended the wedding because of the situation, but many throughout the world participated online, and so it became the first UBF wedding broadcasted through Zoom. When I look back the past year, God really prepared a beautiful party for me through the words of Daniel, 1 Timothy, the gospel passages concerning Jesus’ coming again and his suffering, death and resurrection. I could not expect such a blessing at the beginning of the year 2023. It was truly an abundant feast to me, though I was unworthy because of poor serving of God’s flock sheep. I could see that God is truly sovereign and in his sovereign power he fulfills all the promises of God, demonstrating his love. Christ Jesus will certainly come again. My confession was, “My Lord and my God” and he holds the future. And in the past year God led us to move into a house after about 12 years of living in a condo downtown. This house has a convenient kitchen and nice backyard, which reminds me of the garden of Gethsemane. When we had Sara, Esra, Joy, and Ruthie to our house last October, and Joshua, Paulina, and Dani, and M. Moses, Hannah, Daniella, Eunice, and Jonathan, and Emma and then Ian, Jemmie, Abigail, and Andrew in December, it was like having a beach party to me. May God continue to use this house for inviting young people to the feast of our Lord Jesus. I also expect for the feast of God’s words of the Leviticus and the whole Bible from our Lord Jesus. May we always remember our risen Lord Jesus’ invitation, “Come and have breakfast.”

Now let’s read verse 15. “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon of John do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’” The conversation between Jesus and Peter continues in verses 16 and 17, “Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ 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.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.’” What a beautiful conversation between the two, Jesus and Peter! I feel that it is the most beautiful dialogue in this world” The topic of conversation was “love” with the word written seven times. The conversation is to the point: “‘Do you love me?’ ‘I love you.’” Love is the greatest concern of the people of the world, young and old, great and small.

The story between Jesus and Peter did not end with the beach party, which was full of grace. After the sweet eating fellowship, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” At this point Jesus considered Simon Peter as the one who could love Jesus, the glorified Lord, so God. What a privilege it is for a mere human being to love God! In this world, people try to love beautiful women or gentle great men. But how about loving Jesus, the most beautiful, precious and glorious one! Loving Jesus is an unspeakable blessing. At the same time it demands exclusive love. Jesus once said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” (Lk 13:25-26). It means that Jesus wants from us the full and highest love. When Jesus said to Simon Peter, “more than these”, these could mean his dream or life or the people he was concerned about, etc. He demands the first place in our hearts. It is because he loved us by giving his own life for us, for our salvation and eternal fellowship. He said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” He showed us his greatest love, without which we would perish forever. Each of us is an eternal debtor to him. He has every right to demand such an exclusive love. We are also to know that in such an exclusive love demanding is embedded his whole love, “I love you that much.” His love has no comparison and no equal to us. This is the reason God said first of all in the Ten Commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3; Dt 6:6-7). His love should come first before anyone and anything. There is the order of love. When we love Jesus as the first one to love, then we can truly love our spouses and children and parents and friends. Otherwise, all our love for beloved ones turns out to be the extension of self-love. May our love for Jesus come first always!

Jesus asked Simon Peter consecutively, “Do you truly love?” and “Do you love me?” Why three times?” Probably it was to compensate Peter’s three times of denial. Yet, three is a perfect number and so Jesus really wanted to confirm the love relationship between them so that nothing or no one would sever the love relationship. When we love Jesus, our life is truly safe. Loving Jesus is our strength. So David said in Psalm 18:1, “I love you, O LORD, my strength.”

At each time of Jesus’ love question, Peter responded, “I love you.” Probably being conscious of his denial, this time Peter was not overconfident, saying, “Yes, Lord, definitely I love.” Rather he said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” This love confession was sincere, not based on his human loyalty or his merit but on Jesus’ love, his mercy and grace. There was a time of crisis in Jesus’ ministry, for many were leaving Jesus. At that time Jesus asked to the Twelve, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). That genuine love for Jesus seemed to be revived at this love confession. Later on Peter encouraged persecuted Christians, “Like newborn babies crave poor spiritual milk so that you many grow up in your salvation” (1 Pe 2:3). Those who love Jesus love God’s word. David said in Psalm 19:10, “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.” Those love Jesus love God’s word more than money. When Ian came to UBF, there were several things that impressed him. One of them was testimony-writing. He soon began testimony-writing. Writing testimony is none other than the expression of loving God’s word, mean not habitual or legalistic, but sincere testimony writing. And love is a daily matter, not a weekly or every other day matter. So we eat daily bread, giving him the first hour of a day in our love for Jesus.

And we are to know that love and obedience go together. Jesus spoke of this three times in John 14, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (15), “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (21), and “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching” (23).

It is really notable that when Jesus asked Peter the first and second time, “do you truly love me”, “truly love” love is *agapaó* in Greek, that is God’s love. Peter answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”, where “love” is *phileó*.” He could not answer with the word, *agapaó*, “I truly love you”, but “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you” meaning “You know my heart.” He used the word, *phileó*. Peter’s answer could mean, “I could not love with *agapaó* love, but my love for you is real.”

Then at the third question, Jesus used the word, *phileó*, when he asked, “Do you love me?” It is likely that Jesus lowered his standard and accepted Peter’s love. Our Lord Jesus accepts the love that is less than a perfect love, but not less than a real love. Although Peter was hurt at the three consecutive question, he said, “Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.” Here, we see a question in *phileó* and an answer *phileó*. How wonderful and encouraging it is that Jesus accepts our heart, our loving heart for him, which is real! Whenever I think of our Sunday worship service, many times I felt that it was very poor, number-wise and in environment. There were times more than 30 people worshiped together in this place with a much better environment. Now what is happening? Most times there were just children and parents and grandparents. On top of that, I wonder how my messages have affected the hearts of listeners. I questioned again and again whether Jesus accepted our worship services. However, as I meditated on Jesus’ words, Jesus seemed to be speaking to me, “I accepted all your worship services. I accepted your messages. I need Toronto worship service each Sunday. I know your heart. I know how you have prepared Sunday messages and delivered them to your people.” Even during the pandemic time, we kept in-person worship service, for the number of Sunday worshiper was not over ten, yet still we could have online worship services. How encouraging it is when we discover that our glorified risen Jesus accepts our hearts and our love for him! May each of us offer our sincere worship service to him each week!

Here we cannot forget that Jesus’ conversation with Peter was not just between the two, but always lamb or sheep involved. Jesus said, “Feed my lamb”, “Take care of sheep” or “Feed my sheep.” Jesus and Peter and Jesus’ sheep, all three together complete the relationship. We see that feeding sheep is the expression of loving Jesus, know that the sheep are Jesus’ sheep. We are also to know the characteristics of sheep, though there are exceptional sheep; they are selfish and, most of the time, unthankful. Yet, feeding sheep is the most meaningful and blessed life. Our loving Lord Jesus commands us to feed his sheep in this love relationship.

In this dialogue, Jesus says one more thing, “I tell you the truth, when you were younger your dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Noticeably, this is not Jesus’ command, saying, “Live sacrificially and die gloriously,” although “feed my lambs” and “feed my sheep” are Jesus’ command. John commented, “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” Here is Jesus’ prediction that in that love relationship with Jesus Peter would be a sacrificial shepherd and be a martyr for the glory of God. It means Peter would show agape love in his future life and death. What hope and faith in this prediction! Indeed Peter lived a such life when we read his epistles 1 and 2 Peter. According to a tradition he was crucified upside-down thinking that he was undeserving to crucified in a right position. We are reminded that love is as strong as death. We see that real love for Jesus can grow to be *agapaó* love. In his hope and faith Jesus seems to speak each of us, calling each one’s name, “Joshua, you will be a martyr for my name’s sake and for the glory of God in this generation.” Jesus finally said to Peter, “Follow me” and “You must follow me.” One’s commitment to Jesus is very personal.

We deeply know that Christian life is to love Jesus because of his love for us. May we know his love better and truly love him and express our love for him through loving his word and obeying it and feeding his sheep!