



## Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Contemporary lesson      Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Luke 22: 54 – 62

Have you ever walked in on somebody talking about you? Saying hurtful things about you? Yes? And can you remember how you felt? Embarrassed, ashamed, sad, hurt, angry? Now, what if that person who betrayed you so deeply, was a friend of yours? Or, even worse, what if *that* person was your *best* friend? The one person you trusted with everything? That's almost unthinkable, isn't it?

But I think that is exactly how Jesus must have felt after Peter – his best friend – disowned him. And the worst thing is – Peter didn't only do it once – he did it three times. Three times! How lonely Jesus must have felt... He knew he had a very hard time to face, and not even his best friend was going to stand by him. To save himself, Peter lied about his relationship with Jesus. But when he realized what he had done, he would have changed it at any cost, but he couldn't, because it was too late.

If we look at this story from *this* angle, it is easy to think: What was Peter thinking?! How big a loser was he to have had the opportunity to befriend Jesus, and then to deny it publicly, 3 times?!!

But if we look at this story from the other side, I wonder who of us would have had the courage to act differently?

Say you were a soldier, fighting in Afghanistan, and most of your platoon were killed or captured by the enemy, but by some streak of luck they haven't noticed you where you were hiding. What would you do? Try and get away as quietly as possible? And if anybody should ask you if you were a part of that platoon – just deny it, because you know that *that* lie could save your life?

The situation Peter was in was very similar to that – it was turbulent political times, and the powers that be wouldn't let anything or anybody get in their way to get rid of Jesus and his followers. And Peter was just human...

But once he realized what he did, and that Jesus knew him so well that he knew he would deceive him, it almost broke his heart. And there and then he decided that he would change it all if he could, although he knew that he would never get the chance... humanly speaking, but with God, anything is possible.

Because after Jesus' resurrection – Jesus gave Peter another chance to prove his love to him. Three times Jesus asked Peter whether he loved him, and three times Peter said yes.

The number 3 played a very important role in Biblical times. Because they did not have the advanced medical knowledge that we have today, they believed that only after being in the grave for 3 days, somebody could truly be declared dead – just in case that person was in a kind of a coma or something. And that of course was the reason why Jesus had to spend 3 days in the grave before God could bring him back to life, otherwise people would think that he was not dead in the first place.

If a gentile woman wanted to become a Jew, she had to apply for this 3 times over at the synagogue, and if she could persevere after being denied time after time, the Jewish authorities knew that she was made of the right material to become a Jew.

In other words, in that culture, saying/doing something 3 times was a sign that you really meant it. This in a sense makes Peter's denial of his relationship with Jesus even worse, because by disowning Jesus 3 times, it was a sign that Peter really meant what he said.

But in John 21 we read that by God's grace, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to make it right. Three times over he could assure the resurrected Jesus of his love for him, and at that Jesus showed that he believed him by entrusting Peter with his flock, by formally declaring Peter as the new leader of the church. And this time Peter didn't disappoint Jesus – he literally gave everything he had for the church, even eventually his life.

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And although all of us are only human too, I think that we should learn from Peter's mistake. Let's not deny Jesus in the first place, because we might not get the opportunity to make it right again. Where we live, in a world where it is sometimes frowned upon or even laughed at if you believe in God – let's be proud of the fact that we have a relationship with God. Let's talk about it and show it in the things we do, because differently from Peter, we will not have to face persecution if we say that we know Jesus – so if one of us should deny God or even just stay quiet when others deny him, we would be much bigger losers than Peter ever was...

May God grant each of us the power and the grace to tell the whole world that we love him – 3 million times over, because nothing we can suffer here on earth can ever hurt us so much as those nails through Jesus' hands and the loneliness in his heart.

Amen