‘Do you love me?’ In most relationships, the asking of a question like this isn’t a good sign. It shows that, to the person asking, at least, the answer might not be obvious. If any of us have been on the receiving end of a question like this, you might remember what it feels like to find the right way to say, ‘yes, yes I do love you’. To be asked a second and a third time would have the one doing the answering pretty concerned, I reckon. Now imagine that it’s Jesus doing the asking, when you know very well that you’ve rejected and denied him an his love only a few days previously. I bet Peter was squirming, particularly as in the way he answers ‘Lord, you know that I love you’ makes it perfectly clear that he understands that Jesus’s level of insight is pretty much unmatched. Jesus knew that Peter loved him. He knew that head made a series of pretty serious mistakes. He knew what he was doing when he asked him three times. Each time, as Peter gets more and more flustered, a slightly different response comes back from Jesus.

1. Feed my lambs - take care of the young ones, the vulnerable ones, the ones who are growing to maturity.
2. Take care of my sheep - care for the people who love and follow Jesus
3. Feed my sheep - speak the word of God, that gives life and power.

This might be a simplistic reading of this, but the point I want to make is this:

at the same time as re-instating Peter, Jesus calls and sends him for what he has been being equipped for for years.

Now, this call was specific to Peter. Peter was ‘the rock on which I will build my church’ after all, that was a call specifically his, just as the suffering the rest of the chapter tells us was foretold by Jesus was Peter’s too, but I think there is something which we can take from what Jesus does for Peter here which can apply to any of us who try and follow God and God’s ways.

1. We will all fail, we will all fall. Most of us at one point or another will deny Jesus, whether with what we say, or don’t say, do or don’t do. In that way, we’re all in the same boat as Peter. Just as Peter had walked closely with Jesus for years, so we can walk closely with God now as adopted members of his family. If we are brothers and sisters of Jesus, as the Bible says we are, then we are in the same kind of relationship with Jesus that Peter was. Just as Peter denied Jesus and needed restoring and re-instating, so do we. All of us, without exception. Any of us who’ve been brothers and sisters know what it’s like to let down or be let down by one of our family and how that can feel. We need a route back and if we’re the one who’s made the failing, the only way back is if our family member makes the way for us to come back. Jesus did that amazingly here for Peter and he does it for us too. ‘If anyone is in Christ then they are a new creation’. We are new. Even though we feel old and older by the day, at the same time we have been made brand new by the love and mercy of God. What a great thing that is.
2. We are forgiven and free and it is a wonderful thing, but when we are forgiven and freed we should expect to be called, equipped and sent too. Now, I would give anything to go, basically, literally anywhere apart from my house today, but I know that in this time God is equipping and speaking to me and to others of us in the Church about who we are now and what we are to do, as well as what we are to be and to do in the future. There is a time coming when these phases of Covid-19 will be over. We pray for everyone who is suffering at the moment, all who mourn the loss of loved ones, all who have missed milestones, both sad and joyful. And we are here, in the present, seeking to do what we can to bless as many as possible and bring about as much positive change in our communities as possible. We want to see people changed, that they realise how loved they have been and are by Jesus and give their lives to him. That can take a lot of effort and energy. People come to God one by one. Each one precious to Him. But a time is coming when this period of lockdown will be a memory rather than something we are going through. When Jesus asks us ‘do you love me?’ and we say, with Peter, ‘Lord, you know everything, you know I love you as best I can’, don’t be surprised if along with the smile of Jesus comes your own equivalent of feed my lambs, look after my sheep, feed my sheep’.
3. There’s a cost to being a Christian. I don’t mean in terms of money. The love of God is a free gift for anyone who wishes to receive it. The cost is that you have to be willing for things not to go just the way you want to. You have to give up control. You have to come to terms with the idea that how good your idea of how things ought to go and wanting to do things in your own time and things like that might be, God actually might ask you to do something that you consider to be quite different from what you previously wanted to do or were willing to do. I’m pretty tired of trying to prove to myself that I don’t need help. I’m pretty tired of trying to justify myself, trying to save myself. I’ve been at it for nearly 36 years and it’s not getting me anywhere. Maybe you have no idea what I’m talking about but I’m hoping that some listening to this will do. It’s hard work trying to keep proving that you’re ok, isn’t it. Peter wasn’t ok and Jesus restored and re-instated him before sending him on to be the founder of the people who sought and brought the kingdom of God everywhere they went.

And that’s what we need to be and to do in our time, right now. We are to be people who do the things of the kingdom - praying for folks, lifting the nation and its leaders up to God, being and speaking good news, transforming lives with how we act, speak, spend our money, everything. The kingdom of God is amongst us we’re told in Luke 17. It’s not a matter of eating and drinking but of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, Paul says in Romans 14. Are we people who bring the things of God into the places where we go? Do we bring justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit wherever we go? I think Peter did after he answered three times, yes Lord you know that I love you. I hope you and I can be too. Our world needs us to be, so much.

Amen