

The famous and intriguing conversation between the risen Lord and his leading disciple Peter by the Lake of Galilee has posed a great deal of difficulties to NT exegetes. Of course they try to unlock the meaning of love in Jesus' question and Peter's reply. Three times Peter answers Jesus' question: 'Do you love me?' with the same reply: 'Lord, you know that I love you.' But aha, twice Jesus used the Greek word, *agapas* in his question, whereas Peter replied three times with the Greek word '*philo*'. In Jesus' third question, he used the same word Peter had said, '*phileis*'. Many proposed answers from the exegetes why the words are used in this exchange. I don't know what you make of it.

First of all, clearly Jesus' thrice questions 'Do you love me?' is a response to Peter's thrice offence at his trial before the Jewish Council. By using this same question three times and with Peter's replies, one must understand what Jesus had recently said about forgiveness of sin in his Resurrection appearance to the disciples. In other words, Jesus takes the initiative to forgive Peter's denials. Second, perhaps, we should give a modern translation of the conversation. Jesus asked Peter, 'Do you love me?' Peter immediately replied, 'I'm your friend.' After Peter's twice replies, Jesus asked, 'Are you my friend?'

Friendship with Christ - this concept has often been ignored by Christians as though it would belittle Jesus' role of saviour. No doubt, most NT writers do not have the concept of friendship between Jesus and his disciples. But not so with the apostle John, very likely the 'beloved disciple' described in John's gospel. In the last famous 'I am' parable that is in John chapter 15 we are introduced to the relation between Jesus and his friends as a living organism, a vine and its branches. The life to which the parable points is a life at once divine and human, articulated on an ascending scale as joy, mutual love, and sacrificial friendship (15:11-13).

Classical understanding of friendship as the highest form of affection being selective, cooperative, and sharing of the heart. But in Jesus' parable of the vine, friendship is more than that. There is command and obedience. If one may dare to say, in the parable Jesus sanctifies friendship.

It is from this background we then should be able to understand the post-resurrection conversation between Jesus and Peter at the seashore of Galilee. There is no greater love than sacrificial friendship. Friendship is the special form and term in which 'love' attains its highest expression. In other words, whether *philo* or *agape*, with respect to Jesus, they are synonyms. Peter's reply, 'I am your friend' is not intuitive or impetuous. Rather Peter is

laying claim to the relationship Jesus has taught him to see as most decisive, namely friendship.

When at last Jesus asked, 'Are you my friend?' we know Jesus was pointing to Peter's offence at his trial. Was Peter Jesus' friend at his trial? Hence, Peter's final reply was hurtful but affirmative: 'Lord, you know that I am your friend!'

It was from the conclusion of Peter's reply do we understand why Jesus' command is given to Peter directly: *'Follow me.'*

*What a friend we have in Jesus!* This familiar hymn often sung in a funeral service. It is a reply to the command Jesus gave to Peter. Do you truly believe Jesus is your friend? Have you introduced Jesus to others as your best friend? If not, how do you understand he says to you: *'Follow me.'*