

**Lent Compline Talks 2019**  
**St Mary's Kidlington**  
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**Tuesday of Holy Week: Jesus and Peter - forgiveness and instructions**

Throughout the gospel accounts of the passion, the resurrection appearances, Pentecost and the early history of the church in Acts, Simon Peter is the most prominent of all the disciples. There are also two very substantial letters both of which start "From Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ" and are addressed to the scattered groups of believers which were springing up around the near east. Several other apocryphal books bear his name (there is an Acts of Peter, a Gospel of Peter, a Preaching of Peter, an Apocalypse of Peter and a Judgement of Peter) but in all of these the authorship is uncertain. There is also a very strong tradition that most of the Gospel of Mark was the result of John Mark's association with Peter, listening to his preaching and hearing his eyewitness memories of our Lord.

In short, there is a huge literature on Peter - you only have to go to his enormous Wikipedia entry to realise that. So, who was this very human Bethsaida fisherman who was the constant companion of Jesus throughout his ministry, encountered the resurrected Jesus on a number of occasions, and went on to be the leader of what was to become a world-wide church; first in Antioch, and then in Rome where he was apparently crucified upside down during the reign of the emperor Nero? And what can we learn from some of the key events of his life, particularly those before and in relation to the resurrection?

He started life as Simon son of Jonah in the village of Bethsaida in Galilee and, when we first hear of him, is one of the many fishermen on the lake. Mark tells us that, after John the Baptist had been arrested, Jesus started preaching in Galilee and was walking on the shore when he saw Simon and his brother Andrew at work with their casting net. Jesus simply goes up to them and says "Come with me, and I will make you fishers of men" and you will remember that Mark goes on "And at once they left their nets and followed Jesus". This may be the first indication we have of Simon as a very impetuous man, not given to a careful consideration of the consequences. On the other hand, Mark makes it clear that Simon Peter's call comes *after* Jesus had started his preaching ministry, which in many ways paralleled the earlier preaching of John "Repent, and prepare for the coming of the Kingdom", because both of them had attracted large crowds. So, it might equally be that Peter had heard about or even witnessed both John and Jesus and was at a point in his life when, for whatever reason, he was eager for spiritual growth.

Simon Peter was married - we know that because all three synoptic gospels record Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law in Capernaum - but we hear no more of his wife or any family. He was clearly quite prosperous, because he owned the boat from which Jesus used to preach to the crowds who flocked to him at the lake-side.

If you trace Peter through the gospels, it is a real roller-coaster ride. Repeatedly up, then down. After his call to be a disciple, he next appears in Matthew 14 when, after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus tells the disciples to go by boat to the other side of the lake while he prays. During the night a storm blows up and then we get the strange tale of Jesus walking on the water to join them. The disciples think it is a ghost, but Peter is more practical and says "If it is you Lord, tell me to come to you over the water". On being told to come he starts out but, soon overcome by fear, sinks, only to be rescued by Jesus and upbraided for his lack of faith. Similarly, the disciples are told that their faith is too small after they fail to heal an epileptic. Despite this, when Jesus later asks the disciples who "the Son of Man" is, after some equivocation, it is Simon who blurts out "You are the Messiah" and is then renamed Peter the Rock on whom the church will be built. But, no sooner up than down, when Jesus explained that he will have to suffer much in Jerusalem, Peter took him by the arm and began to rebuke him "Heaven forbid; this shall never happen to you" only to be told "Get behind me Satan; you have only human concerns"

Unusually, all four gospels concur that, after the last supper, when Jesus tells the disciples that they will all lose faith and be scattered, it is Peter who says 'Though everyone else may fall away, I will not' only to be told that he will disown Jesus three times. But Peter still sees himself as the big strong man and blusters on "Even if I must die with you I won't disown you". But, as we know, less than 24 hours later, after Jesus had been arrested, Peter did exactly that when challenged three times that he was a follower of Jesus. It's only when the cock crows he remembers his earlier bluster "And he went out, and wept bitterly" (this phrase always brings to my mind the haunting way it is set to music by Bach in the Matthew Passion). Again, Peter crashes from the heights of hubris to the depths of despair.

There is no mention of Peter at the crucifixion but, in John's gospel only, early on the day of resurrection, having heard from Mary that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, he is again spurred to action, runs to the tomb and, unlike the other disciple, immediately goes in, sees the empty grave clothes, and "believes". Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (which we must remember was written before any of the gospels) says that Jesus appeared first to Peter. He certainly would have been in the locked upper room with the other disciples and women when Jesus appeared there. After this, he and the other disciples return to Galilee as instructed by the angel in the empty tomb. Last night we looked at Peter's impetuous behaviour - jumping out of the boat when the beloved disciple recognised the man on the shore as Jesus. And it is on the shore, after they had eaten, that Jesus reminds Peter of his three-fold denial by asking him three times if he loves him more than anything else, to which Peter can only reply "Lord - you know everything" and is told "Feed my sheep". When Peter then queries what will happen to the beloved disciple John, again he gets rebuked and told "Follow me".

What lessons does this brief survey of Simon Peter have for us today? First, that, when called by Jesus to follow him, we may be asked to give up familiar things and embark on a journey the ending of which we cannot even begin to glimpse. In the same way that Simon received a new name from Jesus, we too are given a new identity as his follower. If Peter's experience is any guide, we should not expect our journey to be all plain sailing - there will be many ups and downs. Like Peter, we should not be timid in our following, but even impetuous or perhaps 'urgent' is a better word? Like Peter and the other disciples, our faith may well be proved to be too weak for the task in hand. However, like Peter sinking into the waves, Jesus' hand is there to help us back into the boat.

I guess none of us here have a problem in acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, but living out that acknowledgement will create difficulties for us as well as bringing joy and a deep, inward peace. At some point, perhaps when we least expect it, our belief in our Lord may be vigorously questioned by someone in public and, unprepared for it like Peter in the courtyard of the high priest's house, we may either actively or passively deny our faith. If we do, then bitter tears of self-reproach are the only real response. But, as with Peter on the lakeshore after the fish breakfast, we will find that our Lord still has trust in us to 'feed his sheep'.

And that is the crucial message I take from this brief study of Peter. 'Feeding his sheep' is the very practical task that Jesus entrusts to all of us who acknowledge and follow him as Lord. The very personal task we are given throughout our lives is to care for those around us, in both the physical and spiritual sphere, so that the love of Christ may continue to be felt in our 20<sup>th</sup> century world.