

## Lent Sermon: St Peter

A few weeks ago in the Gospel reading at Mass, we heard of a life-changing encounter. After a long night fishing and achieving nothing, Peter was cleaning his nets, packing everything away, no doubt tired and frustrated that his work had been fruitless. As he stood on the shore going about his work, Jesus climbed into Peter's boat and asked him to put the boat out a few feet into the water. Then He began to teach the crowds who had gathered. At the end of His teaching Jesus told Peter to put the nets out again, and – though perhaps a little sceptical – Peter responded by saying “if You say so, I will pay out the nets.” As we know, a huge catch of fish followed.

Seeing this amazing event, Peter fell to his knees and said, “Leave me, Lord: I am a sinful man.” Jesus' reply was simple reassurance: “Do not be afraid.” And Peter and his companions left everything and followed Jesus. This brief encounter – the first between Simon Peter and the Lord – could almost teach us everything there is to know about Peter's role in the events of Jesus' suffering and death.

In that first meeting Jesus encountered the Peter we know well from the Gospels: Peter who is a sinful man, Peter who is afraid, Peter who considers himself unworthy to be in the presence of Jesus. Is this not the same Peter who considered himself unworthy to have Jesus wash his feet? The same Peter who was too afraid to follow Jesus closely at His arrest? The same sinful Peter who wept bitterly having denied the Lord?

And yet that first meeting also shows us the Peter who is heroic. We see the Peter who is so eager to do the Lord's will: the one who says, “If you say so, Lord”; the one who leaves everything at once and follows Jesus. This is the same Peter who says, “Then not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well”; the same Peter who speaks rashly but with the best of intentions: “Even if I have to die with You, I will never deny You”.

How those words must have haunted Peter after the cock crew. He then realised just how weak and sinful he could be. Think back to what happened at that first meeting: remember Peter's words: “Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.” Remember how the Lord did not leave him, but offered him reassurance. Jesus did not leave Peter because of his sinfulness: what happened instead – when Jesus was arrested – is that Peter left the Lord. No longer could he hear the Lord's words: “Do not be afraid.”

Peter's three denials of Christ teach us something of the nature of sin. Sin is not when the Lord leaves us, but when we walk away from Him. Sin can make it difficult to hear the Lord's reassuring words in our lives. Sin is often repetitive, and the repetition of sin can lead us to become less aware of its damage. Think of those three denials: in St Mark's account, the first time Peter is challenged he says: “I do not know, I do not understand what you are talking about.” It seems that, even in his fear, he wants to wriggle out of the question; he does not want to deny knowing the Lord. But the repetition makes it easier for him to speak as though he did not know Christ, so that by the third time he is questioned, we are told that “he started calling curses on himself and swearing, ‘I do not know the man you speak of.’”

So easy it is for us to become blind to our faults. Even when we know where we are going wrong in life, it's all too easy to become used to our sins, so that they become easier for us to repeat, and so that often we care less and less about their consequences. This holy season is an invitation to us. You might say that the cock is crowing now! Now we are invited to be like Peter: to realise our faults, to be sorry, to desire to change. No longer should we be content with our failings: by our works of prayer, fasting and almsgiving in this season, we should seek God's grace to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.

We are told that when Jesus was arrested, Peter "followed Him at a distance." It seems to me that this could almost describe the life of the average disciple, the average Christian. We all seek to follow Jesus, but so often we find that we follow Him "at a distance", not quite ready to walk fully along His way. Lent is a time of grace in which the Lord helps us to shorten that distance, to follow Him a little more closely.

In a strange way, although Peter was lying when he said of Jesus, "I do not know Him", we can also say that there is some truth in His words. Whenever we make a choice to turn away from God, we show that – to some extent – we do not know Him. If we did know Him completely, we would never have the slightest desire to turn from His will. We would be so completely overcome by His love for us that we would never even want to seek what is against His will.

The details we read in the Gospel accounts are often so important. Thinking back to that occasion when Jesus and Peter first met, I am reminded of a small but important detail. We know that Peter was first called Simon, and it was Jesus who gave him his new name. St John tells us that just before telling him, "You shall be called Peter" – which means 'rock', Jesus "looked at him." The impression is of a searching look, as though Jesus were measuring Peter's qualities for the task he would face. Now, after Jesus' arrest, the two men are separated, and yet St Luke tells us of a brief meeting just as Peter denied knowing the Lord. "At that instant," St Luke writes, "while Peter was still speaking, the cock crew, and the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." What was this look? The testing, searching look of that first meeting? Not likely – the Lord knew Peter very well by now. Perhaps an accusatory look, to remind Peter of his failings? Even less likely: the Lord was about to die out of love for Peter and for the whole of our race. Surely it must have been a look of pity, a look of love: Jesus looked at Peter in that moment of sin, in that moment where Peter had separated himself from Christ. The Lord, in that moment, called him to repent.

In all four gospels, Peter weeps for his sin when he realises what he has done. In all four accounts he then disappears, he goes silent. We hear nothing whatsoever of him at the cross or even when Jesus' body is being recovered. In fact, the next time Peter appears in the Gospel it is at the empty tomb. Peter, who, seeing the Lord in glory at the Transfiguration, said, "It is wonderful to be here", thought it less wonderful to be a witness to the Lord's suffering. So be it. The Lord knew Peter's weaknesses right from the moment He called him. He even prayed for Peter, that his faith might not fail during those hours of darkness. We don't know how Peter spent the rest of Good Friday and the following Sabbath day; all we know is that the Lord, ever merciful, allowed him to witness the resurrection. So we can be confident. Even when we are too weak to share

Christ's sufferings, even when our faith is not strong, even when we distance ourselves from the Lord in sin, His mercy never fails, and He still calls us to rejoice at His victory over death.

After Jesus had risen from the dead, He appeared to His disciples many times. St John tells us of one such encounter, on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples have been fishing all night, and have caught nothing. This time, the meeting comes when the disciples are in the boat, and Jesus is on the shore. At Jesus' command – although they do not recognise Him – they let out the nets again, and they bring in a huge catch of fish. Now the Beloved Disciple says to Peter: "It is the Lord." Peter – who is practically naked - immediately jumps into the water and heads for Jesus. The same old Peter: enthusiastic as ever, keen to be with the Lord.

And yet something has changed, because Peter – although the same man and presumably with the same old faults – is now a witness to the saving power of Christ. You might say that he has been redeemed: he has sinned, he has shown contrition, and now he has the chance to show his love and receive the Lord's forgiveness. Three times he denied Christ; now three times the Lord asks him: "Do you love me?" Three times he responds: "Yes, Lord; You know I love You." "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep", the Lord commands. Peter is again called to follow Christ, but now he receives a new commission: to feed God's people, to lead the Church. Now, as promised, Jesus gives Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, the power to bind and to loose in God's name.

We rejoice in those keys, because they are our hope. Each of us lives with the deep desire that those keys will open the doors of heaven to us. Let us thank God that He chose to place those keys in the hands of a man who knew what it was to be sinful, to fall and to fail as a disciple of Christ. And let us never forget – especially in this holy season – the price at which the gates of heaven have been opened for us. The Lord suffered and died for us, so that we might be called to live in glory with Him. Let us always remember that the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, now placed in the hands of St Peter, were forged from the nails by which Our Lord was fixed to His cross.