

## Peter - A Success Story

It would be fair to say that Peter is one of the best known Apostles of Jesus. In fact, he is often portrayed as enthusiastic. I have referred to him as a puppy in a grown man's body...indeed, if he had a tail he would wag it.

Peter is one of Jesus' first disciples to be called. He is, by trade, a fisher and by all accounts quite skilled. When we look at Peter's first mentions he is always enthusiastic. He doesn't appear to be concerned with how he comes off. If he gets a question wrong, he bounces back quite easily, unfazed.

Peter is the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah and in his realisation of just WHO Jesus was, he wants immediately to shield Jesus from going anywhere for fear he will be recognised and/or killed. I imagine Jesus raises many a palm to his forehead if such was an action back in the day.

We know that Peter is favoured by Jesus. Early in Jesus' ministry, just after he recognises Jesus as the Messiah, he is told his name will no longer be Simon but Cephas, or Petros (Peter) the foundation of the Church. Cephas and Petros both mean rock.

Now, to be fair, this all seems highly unlikely given Peter's actions as Jesus wishes to wash his feet. He protests that Jesus can NEVER wash his feet. You see, Peter sees himself as Jesus' servant and the idea that the Master would wash the feet of the servant is positively unthinkable.

Jesus, in his gentle way, tells Peter that unless he allows Jesus to wash his feet he cannot enter the kingdom. Our beloved doofus responds that he wants his hands and face washed as well. Bless you Peter. Bless you.

Jesus again admonishes Peter that he doesn't need a bath, but rather this is to teach him humility and service. The master is not better than the servant. Rather in order to be served, one must first BE of service.

Then, in a shocking twist of events, Jesus tells the gathered that there is a traitor among them. They all look around, shocked at this idea. All except Judas. Jesus then tells Peter that before long he will deny him. Peter, genuinely shocked, cries out that he would never do such a thing.

Jesus tells Judas to do what he came to do. Judas kisses Jesus, signaling to the guards that he is the one Herod is looking for, and Jesus is arrested and taken away.

Absolutely startled at what has happened, the apostles flee, fearing for their own safety after what they have seen happen to Jesus. Peter is told he would deny Jesus three times. When he is asked twice if he is one of those with Jesus, his reply is akin to "Who me? Jesus who?" Out of a sense of absolute fear and isolation.

Three times Peter denied Jesus. When he hears a rooster crowing to signal the dawn and his third denial Peter is devastated when he realises Jesus was right. He weeps bitterly at his own shortfall and recently broken promise. Jesus told him he would be the rock on which The Church would be built. And here he is, denying the one he loved so much. Devastated.

On the day of the Resurrection, Mary of Magdala runs to where Peter has been hiding and tells him that the body of Jesus has been taken away. At great risk he runs to the tomb, bends over to peek inside and realising it is empty he runs away. Once again, terrified.

He confirms to Mary of Magdala as he is hot footing it past her that yes, she is correct, the tomb is empty.

In the Gospel of Mary Magdalene there is a poignant scene where Peter is speaking with Mary and the other disciples. He seems to be somewhat offended that Jesus chose to show himself first to her, a mere woman. Her response is delightfully simple. "So tell me Peter, where were you?" Shot to the solar plexus.

Three times Peter denies Jesus. And for many people, that is the end of Peter's story. Yet it is not.

After Jesus is Resurrected he decides one morning to go to the shore for a breakfast of barbecued fish. He sees six of his disciples fishing, including Peter. They have been up all night and have caught nothing. Jesus calls out to Peter to put their nets out on the other side of the boat. Peter responds that they have been out all night, but they will do as he has suggested.

They haul in so much fish that there is a fear of the boat capsizing with all the fish the nets are holding. Peter, who has been fishing in his undergarments, realises now it is Jesus who suggested he throw the net off the other side of the boat. Peter is mortified and jumps in the water to hide his embarrassment.

As the others come ashore, Jesus cooks a breakfast of fish over a charcoal fire. It was by a charcoal fire that Peter first denied Jesus.

After breakfast Jesus takes Peter aside and asks "Peter, do you love me?"  
Peter replies to the affirmative. Jesus' response "Feed my sheep."  
Again Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?"  
Peter again replies in the affirmative. Jesus' response "Feed my lambs".  
Jesus asks Peter a third time. "Do you love me?"

In the Johannine Gospel, the only one of the gospels to contain Peter's restoration, we are told that Peter is hurt by Jesus asking three times.  
"Yes, Jesus, you know I love you. More than anything I love you."  
Jesus' response, "Feed my sheep."

Jesus knew that Peter had denied him three times. He knew Peter would do it before Peter did it. And because Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus knew Peter's restoration would have to be in three parts.

Sometimes English words are not descriptive enough. For example, the word love. I can say I love ice cream, but it's not the same as the love of God, or of my mother, or my friends, or my cat. It's the only word we have.

In Greek there are many different words to describe many different types of love. A theory has been posited that Jesus first used the word "agapaô" from agape or familial love; and the word "phileô" from philia or true love. A deeper, more familiar type of love than agape love.

By this reasoning, the dialogue would look like this:

Jesus asked, "do you agapâis me?"

Peter replied, "I phileô you."

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And with that last verbal transaction, Peter was restored as the rock of the Church. After Jesus Ascension, Peter travels to the community of Joppa where he hears of the death of Tabitha or Dorcas. Her name, whether her Jewish name - Tabitha, or her Greek name - Dorcas, means Gazelle. Dorcas is known as a fine seamstress and supporter of the poor and less fortunate. Most likely she is a widow and her death is a great shock to the community.

Peter arrives in the community of Joppa, unaware of Dorcas' death. As he is sent for and agrees to come to where she is laid, prepared for burial, he hears the wailing of the women standing by her.

They show him the beautiful tunics and garments she has created, all the time wailing and weeping loudly which was the custom of the time.

Taking in all he has seen he sends them out of the room and kneeling down beside the bed where Dorcas is lying, he prays. The words of his prayer are not known. He turns to her body and utters her Jewish name. He calmly says "Tabitha, get up". She opens her eyes, restored to life and gets up. Peter brings her to the upper room window where the grieving community can see that she has been raised from the dead and returned to her community.

And it goes without saying that there was much rejoicing.

And this shows us Petros, Peter, Cephas, the rock of the Church. It took him a little while to get there, but Peter showed up. He heard the words of Jesus, took them to heart and lived out his days teaching, preaching, healing and proclaiming the word of God in Jesus' name.

We will hear more about Peter as we work our way through the Acts of the Apostles. Peter is a big deal in the Acts of the Apostles, especially, as this is where he begins to hone his priestcraft. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church names Peter as the very first Vicar of Christ, a title which is bestowed on the Pope. Hence, Peter is considered the first Pope.

This is often shown in ordinations in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church colloquially referred to as the "holy huddle" in which the Ordinand kneels before the Bishop, who then lays their hands firmly on the head of said Ordinand. The other clergy gathered will also place their hands on the Ordinand, on their shoulders and back. Depending on the number of the clergy gathered the circle gets quite wide and as the clergy lean on the cleric before them, the pattern mimics that of apostolic succession.

There are not many razor sharp memories in my life. I can tell you that the weight of the hundred or so clergy who leaned in when I was Ordered Priest was incredibly heavy. I had been advised not to bow my head so my neck would be able to withstand the weight. That was sound advice. The weight was terrifyingly magnificent and just as I was about to push through and scream for air, the weight lifted, all at once. I took a deep breath, the first deep breath in many minutes, and realised that my life would never again be as it once was.

I can only imagine how that life-giving, healing touch felt from Peter when Tabitha opened her eyes and discovered she was, once again, miraculously, alive.

We know that Peter was trained as a fisher. As such it is doubtful that he would have known much Greek as he was not a rabbinic scholar. It is believed that he learned as he grew in his leadership role. Peter made mistakes, and more often than not there were big mistakes.

I choose to believe that Peter's mistakes were matched by his large heart. Even as he matured into his role as leader, healer and teacher, he always maintained his zest for life.

It is no secret that Peter is one of my favourite Apostles. He is drawn as a goofy, enthusiastic student, who grows into his role as Head of the Church. He does not claim to have all the answers or even know all of the questions, but he does his very best in all he does.

His disagreements with Paul are the stuff of legends! All covered in the later chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

We don't know too much about Peter's life as many scholars disagree about specifics. Shocking, I know! It is believed that Peter was born in Israel, although we do not know exactly when. He was martyred for his faith in 64CE. Legend has it he asked to be crucified upside down as he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same way Jesus was.

Peter is often depicted holding keys, which represent the keys to the kingdom of heaven, as they had been promised by Jesus. The cross of St. Peter is an upside down cross.

I have a friend who became a Satanist who shared a photo with me of a "satanist cross". It was an upside down cross. Excitedly I asked him where he'd found a photo of the Petrine Cross. "The what?" he asked. "The cross of St. Peter", I excitedly proclaimed.

He rolled his eyes "It's a Satanic cross".

I smiled at him. "It's a Petrine cross."

He looked at me and said nothing.

I looked at him, evenly, lovingly and suggested perhaps it was both.

He threw his head back and started laughing. "Trust my best religious Judy to see that as a Christian symbol, when to me, it represents anti-Christianity. It represents everything that Christianity is not. But I trust you and I love you so yes, maybe it is both.

All of this to say, Peter's story is one of humanity and human-ness. It is messy and humorous, and shocking and heartbreaking. It is a story of success, of failure, of denial and of restoration.

Jesus knew that his enthusiastic fisher with a great heart would make a fabulous Vicar, he would be the rock on which the Church was formed. Peter was chosen, not because he was perfect. He was chosen because, in the end, he figured it out.

When I hear the stories of Peter, especially those in the Acts of the Apostles, I know that Jesus has a plan for every one of us. Not because we are perfect, in the way that society would judge as perfect, but as the perfection we are in Christ's eyes.

Whether it be as parents, siblings, teachers, nurses, foresters, accountants, funeral directors, engineers, Nana's, PapaDa's or any other title, label or identifier, we are created in the perfection of God.

And everyone who is reflected in our eyes shares that same perfection. Whether they are bus drivers, teachers, students, black, white, brown, indigenous, settler, homeless, drug addicted, obese or anorexic.

Through Christ there is no "us and them". There is only "we"...the Children of God in the household of God.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent  
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Sermon for Easter 4 - 8 May 2022 - Acts 9.36-43