

Simon Peter in the Gospels: A Witness to Hope

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This short talk provides a reflection on certain Gospel passages about Simon Peter and the importance of hope for Christians.

Introduction

It is clear from the New Testament that Simon Peter was both one of Jesus' closest companions and a major figure in the early Church, but that at the same time he misunderstood key features of Jesus' teaching – on one occasion even being told by Jesus that he had taken the side of Satan rather than God's – and despite his avowed loyalty to Jesus, when put to the test, he betrayed him. In Simon Peter, then, we see a fallible human being, one like ourselves, who despite a life-transforming and life-giving encounter with God in Christ, was unable by his own strength to live up to all that he believed and professed. But, as we read in the Gospels, Simon Peter learned from this and in the first letter that bears his name gives us an indication as to how he had come to understand his faith: 'Simply *reverence the Lord Christ* in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.' (I Pet 3:15)

Peter's Call to Discipleship

Simon and his brother, Andrew, along with Zebedee's sons James and John, were the first four to answer Jesus' call to discipleship, immediately leaving behind their fishing nets and following Jesus. In St John's Gospel, it is Andrew who brings Simon to Jesus at which moment Jesus 'stared hard' at Simon and seeing into him – seeing his weaknesses as well as his strengths – gave him the name 'Cephas - meaning Rock.' (Jn 1:42) St Luke provides us with this account of Simon's call:

Now [Jesus] was standing one day by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd pressing round him listening to the Word of God, when he caught sight of two boats close to the bank. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats – it was Simon's – and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch.' 'Master', Simon replied 'we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will pay out the nets.' And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, so they signalled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them; when they came, they filled the two boats to sinking point.

When Simon Peter saw this he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me Lord; I am a sinful man.' For he and all his companions were completely overcome by the catch they had made; so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. But Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid, from now on it is men you will catch.' Then bringing their boats back to land, they left everything and followed him. (Lk 5:1-11)

So, Simon Peter's call to discipleship, one of the first acts of Jesus' public ministry, is marked by both Jesus' choice of him just as he is and also by Simon's recognition of his sinfulness, his inadequacy for the call he has received. But, Jesus' response is one that gives hope, 'Do not be afraid.'

Peter's Profession of Faith

Part of the reason for Simon Peter not being afraid is that from time to time Jesus' choice of him would be blessed by an insight into who Jesus really was, an early

glimpse of which he had been given at this miraculous catch of fish, confirming what Andrew had said to him, 'We have found the Messiah'. (Jn 1:41) Thus it was when Jesus preached the 'Bread of Life Discourse' in the synagogue in Capernaum, causing many of his early followers to desert him because of his teaching that 'if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you' (Jn 6:53), that Peter was able to declare on behalf of the Twelve, 'Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.' (Jn 6:68-69).

This declaration of faith, a perception that marked out Simon Peter among the disciples, finds an echo in the events on the road to Caesarea Philippi recorded in the other Gospels and presented by St Matthew as follows:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son Of Man is?' and they said, 'Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But you', he said 'who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ', he said 'the Son of the Living God.' Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (Mt. 16:13-20)

Simon Peter, then, was blessed by God with the spiritual insight to recognise Jesus as the Messiah; and in response Jesus confirmed the name of Peter as an indication that His Church would be built upon Peter and his profession of faith. But, as if to confirm his fallibility and weakness, the very next thing that Simon Peter said to

the Lord, rejecting the necessity of Jesus' passion, showed very clearly that whilst he had recognised Jesus as the Christ, he had not really understood what this meant. Thus we see in Simon Peter, as perhaps we see in ourselves, a recognition and a desire for the Lord, but one who by himself does not fully understand and cannot live up to the gift of faith.

Peter's Betrayal of Jesus

Similarly, at the Last Supper at which Jesus predicted his passion and the desertion of the disciples saying, 'You will all lose faith' (Mk 14:27), Peter responded at once, 'Even if all lose faith, I will not' (Mk 14:29), going so far as to declare, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you' (Mt 26:35), only to discover later that night the truth of Jesus' response, 'I tell you solemnly, this very night, before the cock crows, you will have disowned me three times.' (Mt 26:34)

But, as was clear at the time of Simon's call, Jesus, who 'stared hard' at him, knew exactly what he was like, and in keeping faith with Simon Peter, whom he had told not to be afraid, also said to him:

Simon, Simon! Satan, you must know, has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers.
(Lk 22:31-32)

So, despite Simon Peter's weakness, despite even his betrayal of Jesus whom he had promised to love even until death, Jesus held out hope for Simon Peter – that he would recover his faith and support others in theirs – a hope that was to be fulfilled in the resurrection appearance on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias.

Peter's Reason for Hope

When they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do? He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' he replied, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Look after my sheep.' Then he said to him a third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time, 'Do you love me?' and said, 'Lord you know everything; you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'
(Jn 21:15-17)

In this threefold reversal of his betrayal of Jesus, we see Peter come to a certain realisation when on the third occasion he replies, 'Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.' Peter has learned to 'distrust his own frailty' (*RSB* 64: 13) and has come to accept that the Lord knows exactly what he is like; that he has been forgiven and needs Jesus' love; and in acknowledgement of this, Peter is able humbly to declare his love for the Lord – a love that depends not so much on his own strength, but on the Lord the Redeemer having loved him first. This is what gives Peter hope; it is why he should not be afraid; it is what enables him to exercise the ministry of service bestowed upon him by the Lord; and it is why Jesus is then able to say to him:

Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you fastened your own belt and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will fasten your belt for you and carry you where you do not wish to go. (Jn 21:18)

What Jesus has said will happen will come about, because Peter has in true humility come to accept that it is the Lord who is in charge of his vocation, and that try as he might have done in the past, it is not he, Peter, who sets the course for it, but the Lord. Peter has learned that his faith, his discipleship, does not so much

depend upon his own strength, but upon the Lord, the Lord who chose and called him (cf. II Pet 1:10), and upon whom he has come to depend absolutely, entrusting himself in love to the God who loved him first and has given him all that he is and all that he has. Peter has come truly to know his need of God, and it is his willingness to travel the path of deep personal conversion in acknowledgement of his weakness and need, which allows his sorrow for his sin to be taken up into a loving desire for God, that provides the motivation to reverence the Lord Christ in his heart and gives the reason for the hope that he has. May this, too, be our desire and our hope.

Glory be to the Father...

Suggestions

For those who would like to reflect a little more on the possible relevance of Simon Peter's discipleship to their own lives, some texts are offered below along with some questions for reflection.

Begin with the Sign of the Cross and then say the following prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

Then read one of the passages slowly and prayerfully, allowing yourself to dwell upon any words, phrases or images that capture your attention. The questions that follow might help your reflection upon the meaning of this particular Word of God for you.

The First Prophecy of the Passion

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again; and he said all this quite openly. Then, taking him aside, Peter started to remonstrate with him. But, turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said to him, 'Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but man's.'
(Mk 8:31-33)

Why did Peter react as he did?

What can prevent me seeing the action of God in my life?

Are there ways in which God acts in my life to detach me from things that prevent from seeing and accepting His will for me?

The Story of the Rich Young Man

[Jesus] was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, 'Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You must not kill; You must not commit adultery; You must not steal; You must not bring false witness; You must not defraud; Honour your father and mother.' And he said to him, 'Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days.' Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him, and he said, 'There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

Peter took this up. ‘What about us?’ he asked him. ‘We have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘I tell you solemnly, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not be repaid a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land – not without persecutions – now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.

(Mk 10:17-22, 28-30)

What has Peter learned about the nature of discipleship?

What is the meaning of the gift of the hundredfold? Is it quantitative or qualitative?

Are there things that I am being asked to give up in my discipleship of Jesus?

What does God give me in return for my love?

The Washing of the Disciples Feet

It was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was.

They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garment and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin

and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'Never!' said Peter 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus replied, 'If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.' 'Then, Lord,' said Simon Peter 'not only my feet, but my hands and head as well!' Jesus said, 'No one who has taken a bath needs washing, he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.' He knew who was going to betray him, that was why he said, 'though not all of you are.'

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand' he said 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.

(Jn 13:1-15)

What is the meaning of Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet?

Why does Peter fail to understand this?

Do I recognise Jesus' love for me and do I really love others in the same way?

The Resurrection Appearance on the Shore of Lake Tiberias

It was light by now and there stood Jesus on the shore, though the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. Jesus called out, 'Have you caught anything,

friends?’ And when they answered, ‘No’, he said, ‘Throw out the net to starboard and you will find something.’ So they dropped the net, and there were so many fish that they could not haul it in. The disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord.’ At these words, ‘It is the Lord’, Simon Peter, who had practically nothing on, wrapped his cloak round him and jumped into the water. The other disciples came on in the boat, towing the net and the fish; they were only about a hundred yards from land. (Jn 21:4-8)

What strikes me about this passage?

Is there a particular word or phrase that means something to me and gives me hope?