

Sermon for Petertide - Trinity 3 - 28. June, 2020, St. Catherine's, Stuttgart

Continuing the theme of the past two weeks around discipleship, we today zoom in, so to speak, on to Peter, the Apostle, one of Jesus' followers during his lifetime. Traditionally, Petertide is the period during which priests and deacons are ordained for the ministry. And so we remember those especially who are taking this particular step during this time. At the same time, Peter can help all of us reflect on our discipleship in our own walks of life.

The call to follow Jesus came to Simon, as Peter was first known, on the shores of Lake Galilee. For him it meant dropping what he was doing and abandoning his means of livelihood; for most of us these were not the stipulations for joining up as followers of Christ. Yet we can learn a great deal from Peter, as, of all the 12 disciples, it is he whom we get to know best as a person through the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

Besides the fact that he was a fisherman and that he was married, for he had a mother-in-law whom Jesus healed, many incidents in his life with Jesus are recorded. He was one of the few who witnessed the empty tomb, and after the resurrection he had several encounters with the risen Jesus. In the book of Acts he is the key figure along with Paul in boldly spreading the good news as Jesus had told them to, and in shepherding the early church in and around Jerusalem.

For myself, I could imagine having a quality talk with him. That he went on to become the first Bishop of Rome, and ended his life as a martyr for the sake of the Gospel wouldn't intimidate me – and I can't say that about any other Pope, - except perhaps Pope Francis!

To start the conversation, I might ask Simon Peter, the fisherman, what he has to say about the state of our polluted seas. I would want to hear his thoughts on our life as a Christian community in St. Catherine's, drawn as we are from such wide ethnic, national and social backgrounds. But, above all, I would

want to ask him to share what kept him faithful to his calling; how despite serious failings and failures, despite the animosity and persecution he had to face, he never turned back. That is the ground on which I feel I have much to learn from him.

The time when during the trial of Jesus, he denied even knowing Jesus - 3 times in a row! -, is the lowest point in Peter's biography. Our first hymn today recalls that for him devastating experience. The bitter memory of this denial would have stayed with him throughout his life. I feel he would talk about it, and that I could share how I have disowned Jesus in my life, - perhaps not willfully or in so many words, - also because I have never found myself in such a crucial and desperate situation as Peter was in on that night - but equally heart- and mindlessly and more subtly under less challenging situations. This man is my brother, and he is my example. I cannot meet him in person, so I make a point of meeting him in what has been recorded and in his letters.

Our gospel reading from Matthew, for instance, tells of **the** most central, life changing experience for him, the one that made his denial at the trial of Jesus all the more agonizing for him. At the time, rumours about who Jesus was had been spreading among the population, so Jesus turns to his disciples to ask who **they** believe him to be. True to form Simon comes straight out with: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'. Jesus immediately commands him not to spread this openly, in order not to give food for this great Good News to be misused and twisted into fake news. Instead, Jesus gives Simon the new name of Peter, the Rock on which he would build his church. It is Peter's second calling, a very personal com-mission for a universal, long-term mission that needed a firm foundation.

Simon, as we encounter him, however, hardly comes across as a rock in the sense of being someone who is unshakably sure of his ground. Yet, this often impetuous, we could even say somewhat volatile person receives

the highest responsibility for the future of Jesus' mission! Does that make sense? The answer is YES! Thank God, God's wisdom is not human wisdom! Jesus recognized in Simon the loyalty that would stand at all costs because it rested on his faith in him, a faith Peter had made no secret of. Jesus was the rock Simon had decided to cling to. Jesus was the rock on which Peter would stand firm. This faith gave him the strength to rely on Jesus when the crunch came. The waters would wash over him time and again. When his courage failed after he had stepped out of the boat on to the turbulent sea, he reached out for his Lord's hand to save him, and the hand was there. The moment he denied knowing Jesus for the third time, his remorse overwhelmed him; but two days later, when he heard that the tomb was empty, he ran for all he was worth to see for himself, rather than wallowing in grief behind closed doors or arguing the pros and cons of resurrection and forgiveness. After the disciples were inspired by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, it was Peter who rushed among the crowd and

boldly proclaimed the whole story of God's wonderful acts. His impetuous nature, his sometimes over-enthusiastic responses in the service of Jesus, his Lord and only Master became the very instruments in God's service; and his failings became the milestones for seeking forgiveness and for taking new steps in faith.

So, what can we learn from St. Peter? I trust that I could make the point: the great Apostle, this towering figure in church history, is one whom **we can** measure up to. Not in terms of making a name for ourselves or achieving remarkable things for the Gospel, but in terms of remaining faithful and trying to live up to the good news in Jesus. God wants us as we are, with our special gifts: whether we are movers and shakers or those more for the solid sustaining work – for it takes all sorts to build the kingdom of God. Our faults and failings God transforms into lessons learned for the sake of the Gospel. Like Peter we can confidently take the next step in our journey with Jesus. Peter stands as a solid witness to

the fact that God, firstly, calls each of us, you and me very personally and recognizes our potential to be his followers. Secondly, God gives each of us tasks, using our particular gifts and even our individual failings for God's purpose, if only we allow God. Thirdly, our failures, however seemingly unforgiveable in human terms, always leave open the way of forgiveness and reconciliation - with God and with one another. Peter never was made to lose face or to despair. We, too, only have to grasp that hand, and it will hold. Amen.