

Peter's Journey of Discovery

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This address was given at the closing Eucharist of the Merton Conference at Oakham, April 2016. The Conference theme, 'Life is on our Side', was based on a letter of Merton to the Polish poet, Czeslaw Miłosz.

The disciples are 'all at sea' after the death of their Lord. They have made a decision to return to the familiar, to their nets, go back to their jobs: to the cosy obscurity of 'ordinary' life.

Merton tells us, in his letter to Miłosz, about the heartbreaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty. Well the disciples are heartbroken. They had been a part of a great movement. They had been the followers of Jesus. Now they were back to what they had been before.

The fishermen let down their nets on the right side and pulled them in, teeming with fish. It is then they suddenly recognise Christ on the shore and realise there is a connection between him and what has just happened. 'It is the Lord', exclaims the beloved disciple. The memory of Jesus returns.

Yet the recognition must go deeper still. The disciples recognise Jesus as Lord, and themselves, not as fishermen, but disciples. That buried past that is slowly returning is also the past of their desertion and failure, especially for Peter.

And then they can't wait to get to shore and be with him. Peter puts on clothes to jump into the water, and swims ashore. Then the beloved disciple retreats back into the company of the other disciples, who are only players in the story, as it focuses on the two protagonists: Jesus and Simon Peter.

Through the Gospel generally, we see Peter's rise and fall, how he excels and fails. As Merton says in his letter: 'All relationships have to be tried, all loyalties have to pass through the fire.'

Earlier, Peter has recognised that Jesus is the Messiah, and he is rewarded. Jesus' response: "Blessed are you ... And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church." He goes from being Simon to Peter; Peter – the Greek word meaning 'rock'. He is Jesus' rock on which he will build the Church.

You are never so vulnerable for a fall as when you have just done well

and have been praised for it. It's a great moment for Peter. But it doesn't take long for him to slip away from the glory of the moment, into a very dark and lonely place. Soon after the 'rock' moment, Peter takes Jesus on one side to rebuke him for prophesying his own suffering and death that was to come. This doesn't go down well with Jesus, who immediately rounds on him: 'Get behind me Satan ... you are a stumbling block.'

Now perhaps we shouldn't be too harsh on Peter. He is excited, caught up in a great wave of enthusiasm. But Jesus' words are strong, calling Peter 'Satan' and a 'stumbling block'. It's quite a fall from grace: from rock to block in five verses.

And the day before Jesus dies, we have the strong Peter, in bragging mode, as he says to Jesus: 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' Peter knows that this is what others expect of him. He is the rock after all.

Jesus is not fooled, however, and says to him words that have become some of the most memorable in scripture: 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.'

In chapter 18 of John's Gospel, when Jesus had been arrested, Peter stands in the courtyard and denies Jesus three times in front of a charcoal fire, where he stands with the temple police. At the moment of his third denial, the cock crows to mark the start of a new day. And now, in today's Gospel, Jesus is standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee as dawn is breaking.

The details of this scene, the hour of daybreak and the charcoal fire, are intentionally evocative of another time. As we know, charcoal fires have a very distinctive smell, and while for us it might mean a warm evening at a barbeque, for Peter, the smell might have evoked something very different.

So this breakfast reminds us of the moment Peter denies he knows Jesus. It is designed to take us back to Peter's lowest point in the Gospel. Peter's moment of passing from darkness to a light, as Merton wrote to Miłosz, that 'can only be found by passing through apparent despair'.

When Peter finally recognises his own vulnerability and realises that he has fulfilled Jesus' words by denying him, Peter does not only weep, but in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, he weeps bitterly. It is the bitterness of self-disappointment.

Bach makes so much of this in his great Passions. The Aria of this moment from Bach's St. Matthew Passion reflects Peter's dishonesty, his denial, with the soloist singing, 'Have mercy, my God for the sake of my

tears! See hear, before you, heart and eyes weep_bitterly. Have mercy on me my God.' The aria is a six-minute crucifixion of the emotions.

So now, at this resurrection appearance, this breakfast at the lakeside, does Jesus intend to shame Peter? As we discover in the final chapter of this Gospel, the answer is a resounding no. Jesus' invitation, 'Come and have breakfast', bears the warmth of God's eternal, yet ever-fresh hospitality. The invitation is not issued to those who are worthy to receive it. It is given to someone who carries the guilt and shame of a threefold denial.

Facing shame and failure such as Peter's, is always painful, and Jesus does not spare him the pain. Not only does he ask him the question 'Do you love me?' three times, to match Peter's threefold denial, but Jesus calls him 'Simon, son of John' - what he calls him the very first time he meets him. Such formal address takes them right back to the beginning. They must start again.

When Peter answers Jesus' question for the third time, 'You know that I love you', we are told that Peter is 'hurt'. And what is Jesus' response to Peter's confession of friendship and love. Not words of forgiveness, but words of commission. He gives Peter responsibility three times: 'feed my lambs', 'tend my sheep', 'feed my sheep'. Then he tells him that he too will come to a cruel death, and just to seal the point about both sacrifice and discipleship, he says, 'Follow me.'

Now that is a forgiveness story.

Like Jesus at the wedding in Cana, John has served the best wine last; this is the wine of new life, based on trust and empowerment. Jesus has restored Peter to his calling as a disciple.

Peter's story - and ours perhaps - is a story of failure, of bitter tears and love. All this is countered by the Lord's amazing forgiveness and overflowing generosity, which opens Peter - and us - to God's creative grace.

Merton says that much in us has to be killed. Peter certainly discovered this. We, like Peter, are wheat and weed together. God will always forgive us and welcome us at the table. Let us accept his gracious invitation to 'Come and have breakfast'. It is the food of life. And, as Merton wrote to Miłosz, life is on our side.

Amen

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