

“The Rock”

Simon Peter has been, and remains, a person of considerable interest to me. Surely, his standing in the Early Church as one of the figureheads of the Christian movement makes him an object of attention. That he wrote two books of the New Testament adds to his standing. That he shows up so often in the Gospel record is important, as well

For me, it has always been Peter’s mistakes that have been the attraction. He is, without question, one of the most flawed characters in all of literature — biblical or secular. His bravado, his swaggering ways, his self-assurance seems always to be the cause of his destruction and downfall. He will yell to highest heavens his profound belief and give way to the simplest obstacle in the path of discipleship. He makes grand gestures only to see them overcome by some minor display of doubt or unbelief — or, most often, of just plain ignorance and misunderstanding.

Some illustrations.

It was Peter who made the confession: ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”*** when Jesus had asked who the disciples considered Him to be; and then followed it by trying to derail Jesus’ mission to go the Jerusalem and His offer up Himself in sacrifice: ***“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”*** compelling Jesus to call him “Satan” for trying to stand in His way.

It was Peter who, on the Mount of Transfiguration in effect said: ***“This is so cool. Let’s just stay right here with Moses and Elijah and built ourselves a little enclave to maintain the mood.”***

It was Peter who, in the Upper Room, thinking that Jesus would humiliate Himself by the act of washing Peter’s feet, tried to prevent it, only to be told that if he did not allow it, he could not be considered a disciple. He replied: ***“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”***

Peter was the one who proclaimed: ***“ . . . we have left our homes and***

followed you.” and when asked later if he would leave Jesus like many others did after Jesus began to speak openly about His death, responded, ***“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”***

It was the last exchange between Jesus and Simon at the Last Supper that captures my attention most: Jesus predicts the scattering of His disciples in the face of His impending arrest. Peter’s response: ***“Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.”*** That is so typical of Simon Peter — and we all know how it turned out . . . he not only deserted Jesus, in fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction, he denied even knowing his Lord three times.

It is relatively easy for us to stand at a distance and criticize Peter for his actions (or, if you will, inaction). We would like to think that we would have been much braver. When the question was put to us: *“Aren’t you one of His followers?”* we are convinced that we would stand in the breach and confess boldly that we are not only His follower, but proud of it.

Remember, Peter thought of himself in that way, too. Peter thought his conviction was tight; he was bold and daring, he estimated. It would take a lot, Peter thought, to get him to disown his allegiance to Jesus. But all it took was the question, “Are you one of His?” and Peter melted like jelly.

I would like to think that I could have been more resolute than that; I might have faded on the first or second asking, but by the third time I would have found my spine and declared that Jesus is my Lord. I would like to think that, if someone put a gun to my head and demanded that I deny Jesus that I would be willing to walk the martyr’s path and not deny. I would *like* to think that; but honesty compels me to admit that I am too much like Peter — a lot of talk.

This is why Peter has such an attraction for me — I fear that I am too much like He is. In fact, I tend to think I’m better than he is because I like to esteem myself as having a better grasp on what Jesus was about than

did he. Yet, when push came to shove, I must admit that, like Peter, I am truly dense about Jesus' true purpose, and unconnected to Jesus' mission.

But there is something in this exchange between Jesus and Peter that also serves to encourage and embolden me. Jesus says to Peter not just that Peter will wind up denying his Lord three times, but gives Peter an insight as to why that might be: ***“Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,”*** in other words, Satan will come to separate them from Jesus.

Much like with Job, God has not stayed Satan' hand in this matter, but evidently given him free rein to do this sifting job. You can just picture Satan taking the Twelve and running them through his fingers, delighting to watch them squirm under the pressure of his assault on their faith. To Peter in particular, Jesus says, ***“but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail . . .”***

But, we may say, his faith did fail. *That* is precisely what we need to see is NOT the case. Peter stumbled, he denied his Lord, he let his fears get the best of him — but he did not lose faith.

How do we know? Two things:

First, once he realized that his actions had fulfilled what Jesus said would happen, ***“he went out and wept bitterly.”*** This tells us that Peter valued his relationship with Jesus so much that, once he recognized that he had done something to damage that relationship, it hit him like a ton of bricks. He didn't just say, *“Oh, shucks. My bad.”* No, we was rocked (you should excuse the pun) to the core of his being.

That's faith. Faith is not doing everything right all the time, or keeping a stiff upper lip in then face of tragedy or adversity — faith is a real, honest, loving relationship with God, in which God is the primary focus of your being. Peter's faith is shown in that this relationship with Jesus still mattered.

The second thing is that Jesus knew this was what would happen — not just the denial, but what would follow on the heels of the denial. He told

Peter: ***“once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”*** Which is what Peter did.

Peter may or may not have seen himself as a leader — but Jesus did. That’s why the designation “Petros” fits Peter so well — the Rock. This is the rock who could write in his first Epistle: ***“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you”***

Paul could have written those words . . . or James . . . of John . . . but coming from Peter it has so much more honest emphasis. Peter knew what would come of not being ready to make that defense; he knew the pain, the disruption, the bitterness of trying to put life back together when you’ve cut Jesus out. *“Don’t go there,”* he warns us. *“I know, it’s not a place you want to be.”*

On this night when we remember the gift our Lord gave to us in His precious Body and Blood, it is helpful for us to recall why He gave this to us. We talk about it as something that strengthens our faith. I suspect that we see this in images of exercise — sort of like when Jerry the mouse decides that he’s had enough of Tom the cat’s shenanigans and decides to pump up with weights to toss Tom around a bit. So, we think, eating and drinking the sacramental elements will give us a much-needed tonic to pump up our faith.

But, in light of Peter, and our Lord’s praying for him in the face of Peter’s trial that led to denial, I’d like to propose an alternate way to understand how the Sacrament strengthens faith. It begins with the supposition that faith is not something we possess . . . you cannot “have” faith . . . you can only live out faith. Faith is a relationship . . . and in the same way that I cannot possess my wife or own my children, so I cannot take hold of Christ as if I were going to lock Him in my arms.

In fact, if I try to possess my wife or kids, I would run the very real risk of losing them altogether. When I live out the relationship I have with them, something else happens — I begin to see myself differently . . . I

see myself as one who needs to behave in certain ways that will not drive them away from me, but beckon them to come close. When we think of faith in Jesus as holding on to Jesus, we come to see that what we are really doing is trying to fit Jesus into the box we make for Him, or stuff Him in a pocket like some kind of magic charm that we can whip out when the moment comes that we feel we need Him.

When we see that Jesus gives Himself to us and knowing all too well how we will mess up, and lose out, and deny, and deter, and get in the way of His purposes, continues to draw close, we begin to see what an absolute joy it is to sit and dine in His presence.

Jesus knew Peter — not just the bold, brash Peter, but the frightened, feeble Peter as well — and loved him completely; loved him enough to give him the room to fail, and to know the consummate joy of turning back to Jesus again. He loves you that much, as well; as He loves me. Not because we get it right all the time . . . but precisely because, when we get it wrong, when we mess up — even to the point of denying outright that we have anything to do with Him — we can turn again and find His arms outstretched in welcome.

“Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.” Peter wrote that . . . Peter, the denier . . . Peter the scaredy cat . . . Peter the brash . . . Peter the blusterer . . . Peter, who knew the loving forgiveness of Christ as a promise not only made, but kept.

Yeah, I am fascinated by that Peter . . . because I know: he’s a lot like me.

Amen.