

“PETER’S BETRAYAL”

Luke 22:54-62

Well, as we’ve said, it’s Palm Sunday, the day that we remember Jesus’ triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem at Passover time. Next Sunday we will be celebrating the glorious resurrection of Jesus as he burst from the tomb, blazing a trail for all humanity to know the reality of new life. But in between we have this strange week – a week that we rarely really think about in our tradition because we celebrate only what happens on the two Sundays, and throw Good Friday into the mix as well. What we read this morning was just a short episode from that amazing week, from the week in which Jesus had to endure so much agony, so much turmoil, so much abandonment.

In the passage we’ve just read, Jesus has already been betrayed by one of his closest followers and been led away, apparently helpless and powerless. And now we see the deep humiliation Jesus suffers as his closest friend, the one in whom he has invested so much time and energy, the one whom he has predicted will continue his work in the years to come, his trusted disciple, denies ever having had anything to do with him

This humiliation must have added so much to Jesus’ physical agony. Here he is – left alone, abandoned by everyone, even his close friends. He cannot count on a single person. The sense of rejection and failure must have been complete. Much is made of Jesus’ abandonment by God the Father as he hangs on the cross: we don’t think quite so often about his abandonment by his human friends. Yes, they are there as he hangs on the cross –the women, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, and possibly a few others including John. But by then it is too late. The die has been cast. There’s nothing left to do but grieve and reflect on what might have been. Now Jesus is left to his fate, to the machinations of the establishment, the collaboration of religious and imperial vested interests as Jew and Roman wrangle over his fate.

We’ve said it and sung it many times before and in many different ways, but in the words of Joseph Scriven, *“Jesus knows our every weakness”* or of the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, *“because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted ... we have one who has been tested in every way just as we are, but without sin.”* Jesus knows what we have to go through because he’s been through it – and out the other side.

But in this section the spotlight is on Peter rather than on Jesus. It’s a story we are all familiar with and we could probably recite much of it by heart. We could probably also talk about the point of it, the lessons of it, how we should be encouraged by it and challenged by it, without any trouble at all. Of course, it’s all about forgiveness, about the depths to which the followers of Christ can sink and still be welcomed back into the fold, still be forgiven. And we would probably say that we would hope never to behave in quite the way Peter does here.

It was only a couple of hours before – at the very most – that Peter has been loudly protesting his loyalty to Jesus. In v33 he says that he is *“ready to go with Jesus to prison and to death.”* It didn’t take long for that resolve to crumble. And just a few minutes before, Peter has whipped out his sword in an act of sheer bravado and sliced off the ear of a servant in front of a crowd of armed soldiers and officials. There must also have been some bravery involved in following them all into the courtyard of the High Priest’s house. Some have suggested that Peter had a contact on the High Priest’s staff or some other link with the people there, but it appears that no-one knew him so he was pretty well on his own really. He probably took comfort from the fact that it was dark and he could sit in the shadows. But why should he deny his Lord, his friend, so vehemently. Surely we wouldn’t have behaved like that, would we?

Well, suddenly Peter is on his own. The other disciples have all run off, some in rather humiliating circumstances, as we see from the other gospels. He has somehow found himself in the very heart of the enemy territory, so to speak. There is no-one there whom he knows, no-one he can count on as being sympathetic, no-one he can trust. He has seen what they've done to Jesus and suddenly it dawns on him how rash he has been. But he's stuck with it. I remember one evening in London walking home along the road behind the shopping centre. It was after dark, and made extra dark by the fact that many of the street lights were broken. Out of one of the service bays came a group of large youths and one of them asked me if I had a light. I said I didn't and kept walking and then heard one of them call me a name which wasn't terribly respectful. By force of habit (from being a teacher) I turned round and said "What did you call me?" As I said it, I realised the folly of it. Here I was, in a dark back street, with no-one else about except half a dozen large youths who were staring at me with a certain amount of surprise. My heart began to sink and in the split second after saying it a number of rather unpleasant scenarios flashed through my mind. I had a similar feeling stepping in to break up a bottle fight at a Greek wedding in the hall of the church where Sally worked, fuelled only by adrenalin and sheer folly.

That was how Peter must have been feeling. Without thinking, almost, he had followed his Lord into the most dangerous place he could have gone that night. He was probably feeling pretty foolish, starting to wonder about his own short-term future and what might happen to him. The pressure was on and he could certainly feel it building up. It was a horrible situation to have got himself into. (By the way, as it happened, the person who had called me the name just said "Sorry, mate," and we went our separate ways – fortunately! And, curiously, the same thing happened with the Greek revellers.)

Not only was he in a very dangerous place, but he was pretty conspicuous too. I'm sure he tried to blend into the gloomy background, but it wasn't long before he was spotted as a stranger. Even with his cloak pulled up over his head, someone saw that he was a bit out of place. A servant girl claims that he has been with Jesus, but he denies it. Then someone else spots him and makes the same observation. But as he speaks he gives other clues as to his identity and he cannot deny where he comes from. His accent gives him away. There's no getting over that: he is obviously an outsider. A Galilee accent in Jerusalem was a bit like a Black Country accent in Cornwall.

When Sally was pregnant with Rowena, I used to take the other two to a toddler group at another local church. I was the only dad there. I was the outsider; there was no escaping the fact. Hardly anyone spoke to me and it made me feel a bit uncomfortable (and this was before *About a Boy* had been written), but the only real risk I ran was not getting a cup of tea. Peter was risking his life – and once he had opened his mouth he could no more get away from the fact that he was from Galilee not Jerusalem than I could get away from the fact that I was a dad not a mum.

What must also have weighed quite heavily on Peter's mind was the great discrepancy between all the things Jesus had said about his Kingdom and the mission he had, and the fact that he had just been led away by the Temple guards. Peter had been led to believe that this was the Messiah, the one who was going to sort out Israel, who was going to make a new start and overturn the power of the establishment and the Empire. As far as Peter could see, Jesus had just given himself up without even a fight – in fact, when they'd tried to fight, Jesus had told them off and even healed the guy who'd been wounded. What kind of leader was he? Had he just been stringing them along for the past three years? He hadn't tried to defend himself and was now standing in chains. What about the power he had talked about? What about the miracles he'd done? What about the things he'd said to them about protecting them from harm? They were obviously all groundless. Looking at it rationally, Peter really had no basis even for believing that Jesus was who he said he was.

On top of all this mental and emotional turmoil, Peter must be pretty tired. Luke has already told us that Peter and his fellow disciples were “*exhausted from sorrow*” (v45) when they went out to pray with Jesus. Just think what’s happened since then. Peter must have been completely drained by this stage, probably not able even to think straight. *Private Eye* uses the euphemism “*tired and emotional*” to describe people who are clearly drunk, but here it would be no euphemism – Peter is very much a tired and emotional person. He is at the end of his tether physically and mentally, probably totally confused emotionally. Everything he seems to have put his faith in has crumbled around him – the potential victory of Jesus, his own strength and courage, his fellow disciples. He is left, like Jesus, completely alone - scared and exhausted. And he’s put under further pressure by these questions.

What would you be like in those circumstances? How would you react to the potential threat from the other people around the burning brazier? Remember – you know that Jesus wins out in the end: you know the end of the story. Peter didn’t. As far as he could tell at this moment, Jesus was a failure. He had invested so much in this dream that had turned to dust in a matter of hours. It was all over. Why bother any more? Just go back to the boats and nets, back to things that had until three short years ago filled his life. The end is in sight. Jesus is the impostor, the charlatan everyone has said he is.

Now I’m not seeking to rehabilitate Peter – Jesus does that himself anyway. What I’m saying is that, if you were reading this story through for the first time, without knowing the ending, Peter’s behaviour would be quite understandable. It’s not at all difficult to justify – and I’m sure I would have behaved the same way. I reckon most of you would too.

But it’s not the end of the story, is it? I don’t mean that it’s not the end of the big story – the crucifixion and resurrection and all that. I mean it’s not the end of this little episode. As Peter barks out for the third time that he doesn’t know Jesus – even swearing and cursing as he did it according to the other gospel accounts – the cock crows. Dawn is breaking (which gives you a further idea of how tired Peter must have been) and he hears the distinctive crowing. And just at that point, too, his eyes meet the eyes of Jesus. Maybe Jesus looked out through a window, or was being led through the courtyard on his way to the next humiliation. Whatever the actual reason for their looking at each other, suddenly Peter realised what he’d done, remembered that there really was something in what Jesus had said. Even at the moment of his deepest distress, Peter was forced to realise that Jesus was speaking the truth, that there was something in what he had been saying.

Earlier that evening, Jesus had predicted Peter’s behaviour. Not only that, but he had predicted the time and circumstances in which the denial would take place. He spoke the truth and Peter was suddenly confronted with it, confronted with the fact that Jesus did know what he was talking about after all and there was probably no reason to have written him off as a failure in these last few hours. Luke tells us that Peter went outside and “*wept bitterly*”. It had dawned on him – metaphorically and literally – that Jesus was who he said he was after all. There was going to be a positive outcome to all this – or, at least, there was now the very real possibility of it happening. And with that came the realisation that he had blown it all. We don’t know if Jesus was within earshot, but Peter now accepted that, if Jesus had indeed heard him, their relationship was effectively at an end. For the second time in a few minutes his hopes were dashed.

I’m sure you have had occasions when you have acted on the assumption that something was not going to happen, only to find that you had misread the situation and really burned your bridges, to the extent that you had effectively cut yourself off from being involved in the good outcome. I can think of occasions when it’s happened to me and I really have wept bitterly. Peter was now in that situation. It was all over again.

Now, we're looking at this story through Luke's eyes and reading it as we go. He has built up even more tension through this episode. We all know, of course, from John's Gospel, that there's forgiveness for Peter in the end – but there's no hint of it here. What we see from this short part of the story is that we should never write Jesus off. Peter behaved as he did, I believe, because he thought the options were now closed. Humanly speaking, they were. He thought Jesus was a failure. Rationally speaking, he was. But then he realised, as the cock crowed, that Jesus did know what was going on, he was still in charge. Maybe his mind went back to the occasion, again recorded in John's gospel, when some others of Jesus' followers decided to pack it in. Jesus turned to Peter and asked if he was off too. Peter replied by saying that there was no point: *"Where shall we go? Only you have the words of eternal life."*

You may have times when it seems that Jesus has failed you. You're in the pits, at rock bottom. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually – you're under pressure. And what's Jesus doing? Nothing! It seems that his hands are tied and the forces of evil have won. You give up: after all, why bother any more. Jesus just doesn't seem capable of helping. Maybe you've even had thoughts like that during this current crisis and you can't quite work out what on earth is happening.

Then, as it were, Jesus looks at you. Something happens that reminds you of one of his promises, one of his words of comfort or encouragement or challenge or rebuke. And you just know that he is there, he is in charge. You needn't have worried, you needn't have given up. After the darkest night, the dawn breaks and Jesus is there, looking at you, looking after you, letting you know that you matter to him. Before you even get to think about forgiveness or new starts, there's that wonderful moment of recognition – and you will weep with relief, with hope, with the sheer wonder of it all. Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

When I've talked about Peter's denial before, and that moment when Jesus looks at him, I've mentioned a song, written by Pete Ham and Tom Evans of Badfinger, but made famous by Nilsson. I've no reason at all to believe that the song was written with this episode in mind, nor that the writers had any Christian faith, but when you listen to the lyrics and think of this story, the words are a powerful commentary on what's happening here.

*No I can't forget this evening
And your face as you were leaving
But I guess that's just the way the story goes
You always smile
But in your eyes your sorrow shows.
I can't live, if living is without you –
I can't live, I can't live any more.*

Let's listen to the song now and as we do, imagine yourself in Peter's sandals. It seems as if it's all up. But Jesus looks at you with sorrow and love and you know that, even in your bewilderment and regret, you're not going to end up living without Jesus.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Share any examples of when you have found yourself in a dangerous situation. How did you feel? How did it end?
- 2) Try and put yourself in Peter's place. What would you have done? (Be honest, now.)

- 3) Are there any times when you have denied being a Christian because you were scared of the consequences? How did it make you feel? How did you get over it?
- 4) How can we try to ensure that we don't give in under pressure and betray Jesus?
- 5) Read *John 21:15-19*. Why do you think Jesus was prepared to forgive and reinstate Peter? Do you find this an encouragement? Why/why not?
- 6) Pray for those whose faith is being severely tested by the current situation.