

Who Is Peter?

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James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

... *Jesus asked them, "But who do you say I am?"*

"You are the Messiah!" Peter replied.

Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him... Mark 8:29^b-31^a

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for Jesus as our guide for right acting and faithful living.

Thank you for Peter who was brave yet had his weaknesses, too.

Thank you for the talents and opportunities you have given us

and for the challenges, too, to become better people – just like Peter.

Amen

Usually this scripture lesson is the occasion to talk about who Christ is –

"Who do people say that Jesus Christ is – then and now?"

About a year ago, we did a study of a book that explores this very question

regarding how Jesus was interpreted at various times

in the historical and cultural eras of the Church.

That book is Jaroslav Pelikan's Jesus Through The Centuries.

Here are the titles the author used to describe how Jesus was perceived over time:

The Good, the True, and the Beautiful; The Rabbi;

The Turning Point of History; The Light of the Gentiles;

The King of Kings; The Cosmic Christ; The Son of Man;

The True Image; Christ Crucified; The Monk Who Rules the World;

The Bridegroom of the Soul; The Divine and Human Model;

The Universal Man; The Mirror of the Eternal;

The Prince of Peace; The Teacher of Common Sense; The Poet of the Spirit;

The Liberator; The Man Who Belongs to the World.

When Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

it is Peter who answers, "You are the Christ."

In the Gospel of John's version of this story,

the situation is much more dramatic.

Jesus had just told a crowd – who were among the 5,000 he had fed the day before,

that his body was Bread from Heaven and his blood was life-giving drink.

They were horrified by this and the crowd dispersed in bewilderment...

Jesus, then, turned to the 12 Disciples and asked, "Will you also go away?"

Everything hung in the balance for the success of Jesus' mission.

It was then that Simon Peter the Rock spoke up,

"To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

I could imagine the dialogue going more like this:

"To whom shall we go? Please. Tell us!"

Willard, p.2

Humorous to us – maybe,

but those disciples were seriously challenged by Jesus' words.

For the most part, Jesus' followers were working-class folks –
men and women.

The Twelve included four who were fishermen,

one who was said to be a tax collector, and two who were political “zealots”.

Luke the Evangelist, was not one of the 12, but by tradition was a doctor;

The Apostle Paul was a tradesman who made tents;

and Jesus himself was a carpenter.

Some of the women were people of means like

Mary of Bethany who was rich enough to own expensive perfume

and Jesus' Aunt Mary who was the wife of a temple steward.

So, Jesus' first followers were modestly diverse,

but for the most part, not powerful administrators or learned experts...

I imagine Peter to be this big, rugged dude –

wearing a sleeveless sweat shirt and jeans,

curly short hair and beard, teeth like chicklets with a gap in the middle,

most likely the kind of guy who rides a motorcycle, and works with his hands

at a factory, or a garage, or... on a fishing boat.

He was not a scholar, and may or may not have been literate,

yet he was one of those who came along with

his brother Andrew, James and John, Philip and Nathaniel,

to check out this fellow Jesus.

I believe they were young people who were looking for answers

and were ready to live lives of purpose...

Philip told Nathaniel,

“The one whom Moses wrote about in the Law & the prophets in their writings,
we have stumbled upon him.”

As young people, they would have been troubled that their society was dominated
by the Romans and their own corrupt king Herod Agrippa.

Dominic Crossan says that Herod tried to regulate the Galilean fishing industry
with taxes and licensing fees which would put the squeeze

on private entrepreneurs like Peter and Andrew, James and John.

When they finally met Jesus – letting him sit in one of their boats to teach a crowd,
he tells them to go out a little ways into deeper waters

to put their nets out for a catch.

What happened next was their nets filled to bursting with fish,

which was a miracle – and a problem if they exceeded their limit

and had to pay extra fees.

So, Jesus got their attention – and their loyalty.

Willard, p.3

When Jesus met Peter, he picked up right away that this fellow was the “alpha dude” among these two sets of brothers.

Peter was introduced as Simon the Son of John – or as another way of saying his name, Simon Johnson.

The name “Simon” means “wisdom”, but Jesus either already knew about his nickname “Peter” or just intuitively knew that this was someone who was tough and even a little hard-headed.

In any event, Jesus also called him “Peter”, which in Greek is “Cephas” – and in English, means “Rock” – or as I like to call him, “Rocky”.

Peter the Rock would be present at many of the most dramatic events of the Gospel’s ‘Good News’:

When Jesus walked on the water, Peter would jump in to do it, too.

Peter went up a mountain with two other disciples to witness Jesus’ transfiguration into his Heavenly form.

Peter jumped in on theological conversations with Jesus about taxes, forgiveness, and the nature of prayer.

Peter along with John, was sent ahead to prepare the Passover meal for Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem.

At that Passover meal, Peter at first, would refuse to have Jesus wash his feet out of pride, but then allow this out of humility.

Peter promised to defend Jesus and attempted to do so with a sword, though Jesus told him to put the sword away.

When Jesus was arrested by soldiers, Peter followed them to a courtyard.

But Peter faltered and abandoned Jesus, falling into despair.

When the women disciples tell the others that Jesus’ tomb is empty, Peter and John ran to investigate.

Still suffering from shame,

Peter would try to go back to fishing and the way things were, yet Christ would make him face his fears and find redemption.

So, Peter was ready when he stood up on Pentecost,

declaring the advent of the Holy Spirit, and it was Peter who would help lead the Church into the wider world as the first Pope.

Two books of the Bible, used as epistles to teach the early church about Christ, would be attributed to Peter – which he probably dictated

even if he did not write them himself.

At last, Peter would be persecuted and die on a cross himself,

ripened to enter the Beloved Community of God’s Kingdom of Heaven...

Willard, p.4

At that turning point of Jesus' ministry, from wonderworker and teacher
to become a sacrifice by confronting those who would try to scapegoat him,
all would have been lost – except that Peter declared,
“You are the Messiah!”

Jesus praised Peter, but then explained to them all what this would mean –
persecution and death, but also the promise of resurrection to new life.

Peter feared this would mean disaster for them all and tried to
get Jesus to stop talking like this.

But Jesus knew his own mind and wouldn't be deflected from what he had to do...

Jesus praised Peter one minute –

but when Peter tried to dissuade him and turn him from his mission
to confront the powers at work in Jerusalem,

Jesus condemned him as a “Satan” –
literally the “enemy” of God and humanity.

Jesus, then, gathered them to tell them what was at stake.

Yet a week later, Jesus would take this same Peter along with James, and John
to climb up that mountain of Transfiguration to be a witness
and see Jesus emerge like a butterfly from its chrysalis
into the form of his true identity...

Of all the disciples, Peter is the one who is most familiar to us
and perhaps for many of us as Christians,

our favorite disciple – our favorite male disciple, that is.

Peter was quick to jump into situations,

but when he found himself in over his head,
he was still not too proud to call for help.

When he was crushed by failure and shame,

he was still willing to pick up the pieces of his life
and accept the opportunity for redemption
and the responsibility to serve and grow.

Peter is so human and for that reason, dear to us – as he was dear to Jesus, too.
In that way, Simon Peter the Rock is just like us.

Amen

Today's lesson from James 3:1-12 reminds us of the dangers of speaking our mind without examining our heart first...

- ¹ My friends, we should not all try to become teachers.
In fact, teachers will be judged more strictly than others.
- ² All of us do many wrong things.
But if you can control your tongue, you are mature
and able to control your whole body.
- ³ By putting a bit into the mouth of a horse,
we can turn the horse in different directions.
- ⁴ It takes strong winds to move a large sailing ship,
but the captain uses only a small rudder to make it go in any direction.
- ⁵ Our tongues are small too, and yet they brag about big things.
It takes only a spark to start a forest fire!
- ⁶ The tongue is like a spark.
It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body
and sets a person's entire life on fire with flames that come from hell itself.
- ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures can be tamed
and have been tamed.
- ⁸ But our tongues get out of control.
They are restless and evil, and always spreading deadly poison.
- ⁹⁻¹⁰ My dear friends, with our tongues we speak both praises and curses.
We praise our Lord and Father,
and we curse people who were created to be like God, and this isn't right.
- ¹¹ Can clean water and dirty water both flow
from the same spring?
- ¹² Can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine produce figs?
Does fresh water come from a well full of salt water?

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 8:27-38 [CEV]

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went to the villages near the town of Caesarea Philippi.

As they were walking along, he asked them,

“What do people say about me?”

²⁸ The disciples answered,

“Some say you are John the Baptist or maybe Elijah.^[a]

Others say you are one of the prophets.”

²⁹ Then Jesus asked them,

“But who do you say I am?”

“You are the Messiah!”

Peter replied.

³⁰ Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He said,

“The nation’s leaders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law of Moses will make the Son of Man suffer terribly.

He will be rejected and killed, but three days later he will rise to life.”

³² Then Jesus explained clearly what he meant.

Peter took Jesus aside and told him to stop talking like that.

³³ But when Jesus turned and saw the disciples, he corrected Peter. He said to him,

“Satan, get away from me!

You are thinking like everyone else and not like God.”

³⁴ Jesus then told the crowd and the disciples to come closer, and he said:

If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself.

You must take up your cross and follow me.

³⁵ If you want to save your life,^[b] you will destroy it.

But if you give up your life for me and for the good news,
you will save it.

³⁶ What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself?

³⁷ What could you give to get back your soul?

³⁸ Don’t be ashamed of me and my message

among these unfaithful and sinful people!

If you are, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you

when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.