

Sermon Archive 164

Sunday 27 August 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Romans 12: 9-21
Matthew 16: 13-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr John McKean



For a while after Jesus' resurrection Peter was certain of Jesus' way. It was a logical-if very challenging-development from within the Jewish faith. But then Peter has a dramatic change of mind. Jesus cannot be confined to one group of people. He is to be seen as the teacher and indeed saviour for those of every culture and religion – and none- of the known world.

Peter, however, feels his special task is with those born into Judaism, or those who have converted to it. He travels, teaching, north from the Holy Land through Asia Minor, and turning west eventually gets to Rome. Legend has it that he fell victim to the Emperor's persecution of Christians in the middle years of the first century.

So, more of Peter and how he acted as leader:

2. Peter enters the gospel story with little fanfare. He is a fisherman-in his own time, a businessman in a small way. He works with his own, somewhat retiring brother Andrew and the much more in-your-face brothers, James and John. He is married. If there were children of the marriage, we are not told. His wife, and her mother, are mentioned only in passing.

Peter, then, comes with no back story. He doesn't appear to have a strong link with a local Jewish synagogue. If he likely had only a limited education, he can put his thoughts together effectively .

I imagine that life in a small town in the first century was probably no more-and no less - testing than life in a small town today. Everybody would know everyone else's business, strengths and weaknesses. Quirks and failings would probably be gossiped about. But we get no hints that Peter was 'no better than he should be', as the saying has it.

Making your living fishing no doubt tested people as much then as now. People who went out together had to be able to trust each other when the sea got rough. Selling a catch fairly, so no one felt hard done by, was important if you wanted to hold your crew together. And fish, then and now, are perishable goods. If you wanted to make ends meet, you had to deliver the goods. No-one owed you a living.

A politician of the era might think of Peter as one of the world's battlers. Who, really, can complain about such a description?

3. If Peter probably didn't have a great deal of schooling, what he lacked in formal education, he made up for with good instincts.

Now the first gospel that was written down is Mark's gospel. It is the shortest. It also influenced Luke and Matthew, who largely follow Mark's scheme. They use many of his words and phrases.

There is this very ancient tradition of a link with Peter and the writer of St Mark's gospel. John Mark, to give the gospel writer his full name, is thought to have been given the facts and told the stories by Peter.

Peter is the author of two short pastoral letters. Those who understand about ancient languages say that First letter of Peter is in very good Greek. It is suggested that someone listened to Peter speaking, edited and tidied up his thoughts as he wrote—a common occurrence in the ancient world. Second Peter, which is in less polished Greek, might be the very words of Peter.

Peter had sound instincts. He knew the power of the written word. And he knew the power of a well-phrased explanation, in his Pentecost speech, and in his speech to the Jerusalem Council explaining that the early church should pursue not only a Jewish mission but also a gentile mission.

4. Much of what we know of Peter is positive. He is active and he is forthright. If his greatest insight—that the way of Jesus was for all—took time to mature, it was worth the wait. It was all the more valuable being promoted by the man of action Peter than by the intellectual Paul.

4 But Peter's path was not a uncomplicated moving from one achievement to another.

Peter was the first to recognise the greatness of Jesus announcing 'you are the Christ, the Son of the living God' But he was also the first, and controversially the most insistent, to seek to persuade Jesus away from his challenges that Jesus felt convinced he would face.

We do not know whether, on the Sea of Galilee, Peter was indeed walking on water or whether there was a natural, scientific explanation why his first steps were secure. What is recorded—to inform and challenge successive generations—was that Peter's confidence was misplaced. He required rescuing.

After the last Passover meal, everything went badly wrong. The local authorities seized the opportunity to manipulate the situation. Agitators stirred up the crowd. Fabled Roman justice was turned into a mockery by the hapless Pontius Pilate.

Peter's impulse had been to stand by Jesus, but his bravery failed him. By the time dawn broke he had three times denied he had anything to do with Jesus.

It speaks well of all those who had a hand in writing the gospels that these unflattering, demeaning episodes in which Peter features all appear in the Bible.

5. It speaks well of Peter. With his failings out in the open, he not only stayed his course but also was free to go in new directions.

6. An a few years, a major impasse was looming. Was it really possible to have both Christians from a Jewish background, and Christians from a Gentile background in the same organisation?

Jewish rules and practice, some onerous, some minor, ordered Jewish life from the cradle to the grave.

Gentile Christians in their own eyes could be living upright lives. But they were indifferent to many pagan practices abhorrent to Jews. One such was purchasing food on sale in a market place. Such food might have been offered up as a sacrifice to a local deity, then, without ado, offered for sale. This made simple acts of hospitality fraught with difficulty.

Within fifteen or so years of Jesus' death and resurrection, whether Gentile Christians could be first-class citizens in the Christian organisation had become a burning issue.

Earlier, at the first Pentecost, Peter had explained what had happened to the group in Jerusalem which was accused of being drunk-a group from the Four Corners of the known world.

Peter was at first a reluctant convert to the idea of a more ecumenical Christian gathering in which members of both Jewish and Gentile background were members on equal footing. But change he did.

The Jerusalem council stipulated only three or four requirements. We can imagine that someone had to 'work the phones' and 'do the numbers' to use modern political slang-to get it accepted. But accepted it was.

Peter:

A leader who was grounded in a healthy reality.

A leader who had the ability to sort the real from the ephemeral; unafraid to record what he knew for posterity;

A leader who was not perfect but who recognised his mistakes and profited from them;

A leader who was not hamstrung by his background, race or traditions. and

A leader not afraid to compromise for the greater good.

7. I feel certain some people here today feel there's an elephant in the room. I need to address it.

I got to know a good Catholic family through work. Later, it became an open secret that the son of the family had decided to go to college to train as an Anglican minister. I wondered how well this news was received.

I had the chance to ask the son a few years later. He said by the time he and his mother had 'the talk' his going to train was no secret. She was well prepared. She got out her Bible, read a passage aloud- yes, the passage read today-and said, 'Well if you go, you will be part of a church, but not a part of the church'

- a. Roman Catholics indeed take these words not only as a commission for the man Peter, but also apply them to Peter's successors-265 of them to date. The power to bind and to loose finds one of its high points in making infallible statements on doctrine. Now in the sweep of history Roman Catholicism has provided that church, and sometimes the entire world, with some well-respected, highly regarded leaders.
- b. Among the anniversaries falling in 2017 is the 500th anniversary of the protestant reformation. Protestants from Martin Luther onward have been sceptical that the words of Jesus extended from Peter to all those who were elected to fill the position he is said to have held.

Taking the words of Jesus doesn't fit with easily with the times of Simon Peter the fisherman. It is clear Peter was not a stand alone leader. James, one of his fishing companions, was the leader of the Jerusalem Church. Paul was looked up to by a wider group of Christians. And the big decision at the Jerusalem Council that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were of equal standing was decided by a council, not proclaimed by an individual.

The protestant point of view on this text can be put simply: It is people like Peter in every age and time who form the foundation of the Christian church.

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