

The Apostle Peter

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Matthew 16:17-19

During Lent this year we will take up the major personalities who are involved in the Passion account, beginning with Peter. The difficulty with a project of this kind is the temptation to make it interesting. Of course we are interested, but the main thing is to ask what it means for the Gospel.

The Apostle Peter is the apostle we know the most about. Even though Paul wrote more of what we call the New Testament than anyone else, we don't know as much about Paul's life and what he did as we do about Peter.

In the Second Century it was said that the Gospel of Mark (which was the first of the four gospels written), is the record of Peter's preaching. What's curious about that (there's no reason to say yes or no about that) is that if you go to the Gospel of Matthew, it alone has four sections that emphasize Peter:

- Matthew 10:2. Only Matthew uses the word "first" of Peter: "The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, . . ."
- Matthew 14:22-33. Only in Matthew's account of the stilling of the storm does Peter jump out of the boat to walk on the water.
- Matthew 16:16. The confession: "You are the Christ . . ." is found in the first three gospels, but only in Matthew does Jesus say: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church . . ." (Matt 16:18).
- Matthew 17:24-27. This account of the coin from the fish's mouth used to pay the tax to Caesar features Peter and is found only in Matthew.

The Gospel of Matthew is longer than Mark or Luke and has been the favorite gospel of the Western church. This is not surprising because only in the Gospel of Matthew is the word "church" used (16:18 and 18:18).

What role, what importance does Peter have? He has the role of spokesman. He was the one who spoke for the rest of the disciples. He was also in that smaller group of three (Peter, James, and John. James and John were brothers). Again Peter seemed to have a leading role. Perhaps it was because he was older, or he was married, as we know, but the fact is that he played a

certain role throughout the gospels in which he speaks up. He seems to be the one to whom people turn.

In Luke 22:31-32 there is the story just before Peter denied Jesus in which Jesus says to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" ("have turned again" = have repented).

It is sometimes said that Peter has a certain kind of infallibility. But in the Book of Acts it gives this same role of strengthening the brethren to others, such as Paul in Acts 18:1-17. Peter is very prominent in the first fifteen chapters of the Book of Acts. Then all of a sudden in the fifteenth chapter, in what is called the Apostolic Council where the leaders get together, Peter isn't leading the meeting, but James, Jesus' brother, is. Peter has something to say, but he doesn't have the decisive, leading role. And then for the rest of the Book of Acts, through chapter 28, he disappears.

In the Gospel of John there is a kind of competition between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. In John 20:4 after the crucifixion, Peter and John race to the tomb. Who wins? The Beloved Disciple. He doesn't look in, but he gets there first. John 21:18-19 says Peter is going to be crucified upside down because he's not going to be crucified like his Lord. Then, right at the end, the final passage (John 2:23), Peter turns and asks Jesus about the Beloved Disciple: "Lord, what about him?" And Jesus said to him: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" Thus there is a curious parallelism between Peter and the Beloved Disciple and muted leadership by Peter in the Gospel of John.

Matthew 16:18 is not merely a famous passage. It is usually said to be the most disputed passage in the New Testament. It says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . ." (Matt 16:17-19). There's been a lot of ink spilled about what this rock is. You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church. If you take this passage and translate it back into Aramaic, you will find that it says, "You are *kephas*, and on this *kephas* I will build my church." There's no distinction between two kinds of "rock." Therefore the passage has to mean that the church is built on Peter.

What does that mean? Even though “binding and loosening” have been given to the Twelve in Matt 18:18, in Matt 16:18 the power of the keys is given only to Peter.

In Matt 16:18 Jesus says to Peter: “You are the rock,” and only a few verses later in Matt 16:23, Jesus says to him: “Get behind me, Satan.” Two absolutely opposite declarations said in close proximity to each other.

When we look at the story of Peter, we recall that he speaks up and says: “They will all deny you, but I won’t.” But then he betrays Jesus in what can only be called a craven fashion.

Luke 24:34 records that the first resurrection appearance to a male is to Peter (The first appearance was to Mary Magdalene. John 20:14-18). We think: “O.K. now Peter gets it.” And yet in John 21:3 Peter says: “I’m going fishing.” He doesn’t mean fishing for men; he means just going out to catch fish. However, the Lord appears and that changes what is happening.

We would think that having fumbled so badly earlier, he would have straightened up. And yet there is that astonishing place in Galatians 2:11-14 where Paul writes about being with Peter at Antioch. They had made an agreement in Acts 15 that they would deal fairly with those who were Gentiles and not require the law. Peter agreed to that, but he didn’t hold to it. Paul had to rebuke Peter for refusing to eat and share with the Gentiles. In Gal 2:14 Paul then says: This had to do with “the truth of the gospel”; this was not some minor matter.

What about Peter? Someone has said that the name “rock” really means “rocky.” Not like the movie *Rocky*, but rather in the sense that he’s shaky. It is ironic.

And why build a church if the end is coming soon? As we know, Paul understood that the end was coming within his generation. A generation was understood as forty years. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, Paul writes: “I declare to you by the word of the Lord that we who are alive and are left until the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.” Paul clearly and definitely understood that the end of the world, that is the second coming of the Lord, was going to happen soon. In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 he writes:

“Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed.”

Sleep here is a metaphor for dying. “We shall not all sleep” means we shall not all die before the end comes.

There are hints of the same kind of thinking in the gospels. In Mark 9:1 Jesus says: “Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.” And in Matthew 10:23: “Truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns in Israel before the Son of Man comes.” There’s some reason to think that they all thought that the end was coming soon, and until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., they really thought the end was coming and that would be it.

We know that it’s likely Peter went to Rome and died there as a martyr, but that doesn’t mean that the original passage in Matthew 16:17-19 meant that there was a plan for a future church.

In 1950 archeologists excavated in Rome where they thought the tomb of Peter was. And there was a news report that they had found his bones! But later they discovered that the bones were the bones of a woman, and this claim to have found Peter’s bones disappeared. Peter probably died in Rome, and his body was thrown into the Tiber River, which is how such executions were handled. Peter was not the first pope, even though the Catholics like to talk about the how the acorn was planted and became the great oak.

The first pope in any real sense was Damasus, who reigned as pope from 366 to 383 A.D. That’s late. The first sack of Rome was in 410 A.D. and Rome fell, it is usually said, in 476 A.D. As the power of Rome declined, the power of the Catholic Church increased. If you look at the Roman Catholic Church and think of the Roman Empire, you can see they are mirror images of each other.

Peter was not the first pope, and in the gospels there was no plan for a future church. He also was not what we usually call a saint. A saint is by

definition somebody who died as a martyr, and he very likely did. But when we look at him and how he acted, betraying our Lord, jumping in the water to see if he could walk on it, he is impetuous, mercurial, and a very fascinating person. We remember him as the typical Christian, the one who, as long as he's looking toward the Lord, can walk on water, but as soon as he looks to himself and what he's doing, he sinks like a rock. Amen.