

Peter's escape from prison #2 - Acts 12:1-17

24th October 2010

Jon preached last week about the big picture of what was going on politically in the Roman world at the time Acts was being written and he told the story of Peter's arrest and escape from prison in that context.

Today I want to tell the same story, but focusing more on Peter himself.

Because, apart from a short speech in Acts 15 and the 2 letters he wrote near the end of the Bible, this is the last we hear about him in the bible, although tradition says that he was crucified in Rome around AD64

Peter is one of these people who didn't start out particularly well, and on the way, made some of the biggest mistakes, but through his life was wonderfully changed and redeemed by his friendship with Jesus.

Peter was a fisherman when Jesus told him to put down his nets on the other side of the boat; even though he was a bit reluctant, he did what Jesus had said and caught a huge amount of fish. Then Jesus called him – “Come, follow me and I will make you a fisher of men.”

And so Peter became one of Jesus' closest friends – he was allowed to see Jesus raise Jairus' daughter from death; he went up on the mountain and saw Jesus transfigured – (His Glory)

And bit by bit he came to understand that Jesus is the Messiah – God's Son; Saviour, although on the way he received many corrections and rebukes!

When Jesus announced that He was about to die and that everyone would abandon Him, said “no way!” But then, as Jesus said, Peter disowned Him 3 times and weeping bitterly at what he had done, went away from the other Disciples.

But after the Resurrection, Jesus went especially to Peter and restored him, then, on the Day of Pentecost, he was the main spokesman for the Church, and became one of the key leaders – healing the lame man begging at Gate Beautiful, seeing Aeneas healed and Dorcas raised to life and then taking the Gospel on to the Gentiles (non-Jews)

I want to look more closely at two sets of events that happened to Peter because they show the effect that Jesus had on his life and they also show something of the process involved.

And I think that both of these things can apply to us as well, as God works in our lives in a similar way.

The first two events were in the middle of his life and were probably the worst and best moments of his life.

As I mentioned, Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, before the Crucifixion, told His Disciples that they were all going to abandon Him.

One by one, they all went round saying "Never! Not me Lord!" and Peter said:

"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. (Matthew 26:33-35)

And in the confusion and fear of that night, that's exactly what happened:

(They seized Jesus) led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.

Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:54-62)

Just as Jesus had said he would, Peter had said "I don't know Him" not once, but three times – and as the words came out for the last time, the cockerel crowed and Jesus looked over, and their eyes met – and Peter knew that he had just abandoned God's Son – his best friend and his Saviour; and things could never be good again.

Then, a few days later, after the Resurrection, Peter had given up on being a disciple and had gone back to being a fisherman; he knew he had blown it and there was no way back.

And then Jesus rose again and told Mary Magdalene "Go and tell my disciples...and Peter, I'm alive!"

And then Jesus appeared to Peter:

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. (They had seen Jesus do this before)

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

The type of fire that Jesus made here is important; there is a normal word for fire that the Bible uses – except for here and one other place (where it uses "anthrakia") The other time this kind of fire is mentioned is the one Peter had warmed himself next to the night he betrayed Jesus.

I don't think that this was coincidence; I believe that Jesus was taking Peter back; reminding him of his failure, so that he could restore him.

And just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, so now Jesus asked him this:

...When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?"

He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Three denials, now wiped out by three declarations of love! And then Peter was re-called by Jesus – "Follow me!"

I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (John 21:4-19)

...And from this point on, Peter never looked back.

As Peter was chained to the guard in Acts 12, I wonder whether these words of Jesus came back to him about how he was going to die? I wonder whether he remembered that Jesus had said "when you are old..."?

He was in prison; no way out; 4 squads of guards watching him; his friend and fellow disciple James had just been executed, and he was sentenced to death – probably facing execution in a couple of days' time.

So he was there helpless and the Church was meeting together to pray earnestly for him...and what was he doing?

Sleeping!

There are lots of places in the Gospels and Acts where you can compare things that happened near the beginning and then later on in Peter's life; and this sleeping reminds me of a time when Peter was a bit younger – one of Jesus' disciples when Jesus had said that they were to cross the Sea of Galilee.

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he (Jesus) fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

The disciples (including Peter the fisherman who had grown up on this lake) went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!"

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." (Luke 8:22-25)

Then it had been Jesus who, in the face of this imminent danger had fallen asleep so soundly that the storm and water in the boat hadn't woken Him, so the disciples had had to.

And then one word and the waves were still – and the disciples had learned that if Jesus said "we're going to the other side of the lake", then that is where they would go. And they had been rebuked – not for their fear, but for their lack of faith, where they had looked at their circumstances rather than listening to Jesus' Word.

Later he said:

"All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the Lord stands forever." (1 Peter 1:24-25)

Now in this prison cell, I think that Jesus' Word had given Peter enough peace that he could get a good night's sleep – even in prison, on 'death row', chained to two Roman soldiers!

Maybe he had reasoned "Perhaps this is my time and I'll soon go to be with Jesus. But He said 'When you are old...' And anyway, I've seen Him calm storms and sort out impossible situations before; and I've seen Him raise the dead and conquer Death Himself, and I know He can deliver me!"

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell (This didn't wake sleeping Peter, so...) He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." (Maybe while he was asleep he was dreaming about just that!)

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. (Acts 12:1-17)

The Gospel is about lives getting changed, and the place you often see this most clearly is when people are in the most intense times of pressure:

Someone said if you squeeze lemons, you get lemon juice; if you squeeze oranges, you get orange juice, and if you squeeze a man, you get whatever is in his heart.

What came out of Peter in this most pressured time – staring death in the face, was the Peace of God that passes all understanding.

And for Peter, it didn't just come from lots of amazing experiences; it came from knowing in his heart of hearts that despite his failings, he was wonderfully accepted and loved by God.

Acts is a book about how the Church started and grew and is our model of Church life to follow.

It's the story of how the Risen, Exalted Jesus works in His Church to bring His Salvation to the nations.

But it is also the personal story of what happens when our Loving Saviour touches broken people, with all their weaknesses and failures and changes them to be rooted in His Peace, changed at the deepest level, restored, forgiven, empowered by His Spirit, loved and displayed as demonstrations of His Grace.

We've spoken lots over the months about being The Church on a mission – and we are; but the Church is made up of individuals who Jesus is cleaning up and forgiving and blessing – us!

Let's keep on coming to Him to know His forgiveness and reinstatement where we need to.

Let's fix our ears on His Word, rather than our eyes on our circumstances

And let's know Him working in our lives.