

AN INITIAL ENTHUSIASM

Between now and Palm Sunday, I want, insofar as I am able, to set before you the five major turning points in the life of the Apostle Peter. Peter is not a great thinker, or a great theologian like Paul. He is not a great organizer like James (the brother). He is not wealthy, like Levi, or a revolutionary like the other Simon, called the Zealot. Some of his best contributions are the result of his bungling. Despite the Roman Catholic insistence that Peter was the first Pope, in his lifetime Peter seems to consistently duck every official position of leadership. He blusters, puts his foot in his mouth, guesses wrong, and makes bad choices over and over. Yet he keeps learning, people love him, and, next to Jesus, he seems to be the greatest healer of the time (Paul is close). Nevertheless, while others are starting new churches, organizing feeding programs, holding great Councils, and carrying forth the work of the Kingdom, Peter just seems to “wander about” – encouraging, preaching, healing, visiting – but without specific aim or title or purpose. Yet his influence and impact are enormous.

While it is probable that most of the disciples were married, we know for sure that Peter was married. The first hint is in the very first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law. (Mark 1:30; Matthew 9:5; Luke 4:38) It is very difficult to heal someone’s mother-in-law if they are not married. It is difficult enough, even if they *are* married. It delights me to know that being married is no excuse for failing to follow Jesus. I hope it delights you too. It also delights me to know that the first Pope was married, and that celibacy was a mistake we added later in the game. I have always been sad that Peter’s wife did not write an account of how this whole business looked from her perspective. But we do not know her name. We do not know if she was home taking care of the children when Peter first joined Jesus’ Movement. We only know that she traveled with Peter in his later years. (I Corinthians 9:5)

In any case, many of us can identify more easily with Peter than with any other major player in the early church – at least at first. More importantly, Peter goes through major phases – major turning points – in his spiritual awakening and development that are classic for us all. It is fun to track him, and see if that helps us to track

ourselves. Moreover, Peter makes it abundantly clear that conversion is not a one-time, one-dimensional experience. No matter how dramatic our first awakening, it is never the end – it is only the beginning of our pilgrimage. We keep getting converted, layer after layer. Once is not enough! If it is only once, that means we went back to sleep ... fell off the Path ... stopped following THE WAY. I think most of you know this. But large segments of current-day Christendom do not seem to know this. At least they do not talk or act as if they know it. That makes it doubly important for us to know and remember it.

My first two trips to Israel were accompanied by the same Jewish guide, Yacov (Jacob). He was sabre, born and raised in Israel, fought in the wars – the whole deal. Once, in the Galilee, the second year when we had come to know each other a little, we sat talking one evening after everyone else had gone to bed. He told me that three times in his career as a guide, members of Christian groups he was guiding had grabbed him unawares and forcibly baptized him against his will (once in the Jordan, twice in the ocean). Moreover, it had happened to many of his friends who were also guides. Yacov was very philosophical about it – just one of the hazards of the trade, he figured. I found it deeply offensive. Why would Christians behave this way? What did they suppose this would accomplish? Did they really think Jesus would appreciate such effrontery in His name? Did they actually believe this was “following Jesus” in attitude and intention and method? Of course, I know what really happened: They came to adore Yacov because he was such a wonderful guide, and they could not stand the thought that he was going to Hell. So they dunked him. Hazards of the trade, indeed. Is that really how it works? Is that really what conversion is about? Who is teaching Christians in our time to think and act in such ways? Yacov and I were talking that night because he had realized that our group was not like most he had traveled with, and it intrigued him. I was the first Christian, it seemed, who genuinely believed that he was not damned because he was Jewish. He sensed that our group did not believe this way either. “Why don’t we know that there are Christians like you folks?” he wanted to know. How could I tell him that “our brand” of Christians are afraid to speak of what they believe – or too busy to let their faith be known?

Peter's story is not told to us by or for itself. It comes to us in bits and pieces along the track of a much larger story. Fragments and anecdotes from his many years of ministry drift back to us from beyond the New Testament. From the New Testament itself, we get incidents and comments, mostly in passing. The focus is on Jesus. But Peter hangs around with Jesus. The bits and pieces mount up, and some of Peter's story unfolds. We discover that there is something very familiar about Peter. He could almost be somebody we know. He could even be us. Peter is a kind of prototype, a kind of model, for at least a large segment of those of us who try to follow Jesus.

Sorry for technical asides, but several names are used for Peter in the Bible: Simon, Symeon (Simeon), Cephas, and Peter. *Simon* is Greek for the Hebrew *Simeon* – as in Jacob's second son and one of the twelve tribes of Israel. That is Peter's real name: Simon son of Jonas (Jonah or, in Greek, John). But there are two Simons among the twelve disciples. Obviously one must be given a different name. So Jesus nicknames Simon *Cephas* (Aramaic, *Kephas*), which means "stone." The Greek equivalent is *Petros* – rock. Hence, Peter. Especially when Peter is referred to as Cephas, some modern readers miss the connection.

Peter's brother is Andrew, and they both come from Bethsaida, which means "house of fishing." Bethsaida is a suburb or village of Capernaum – Jesus' headquarters during His ministry.

The first major phase of Peter's spiritual awakening reveals a remarkable and essential change in his life. It is the only part of the story we will look at today. We could call it Peter's first conversion. If conversion means "to change," Peter certainly qualifies! We could title this first phase: FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. It is a period in which Peter's lifestyle, his direction, his goals, and his beliefs are all dramatically changed. As we just mentioned, he is even given a new name to go along with his very different life: Rock. The overall mood of this first period is that of an initial enthusiasm.

Let us take a quick look at Peter's first conversion. It has five ingredients, and they are classic. You can find the same five in the story of Moses, or Paul, or Jeremiah, or any of the great prototypes. Peter ends up being among them.

FIRST, Peter listened to the Word. He heard Jesus preaching. He did not just hear Jesus – he *heard* Jesus. Some of it was getting through. (Interesting that *Simon* means “hearing.”) We do not know much about Peter up to this point. He was a Jew and a Galilean fisherman, and he had a family to support. But conversions do not come out of nowhere. Peter seems to be part of a group of Galilean fishermen (including his brother Andrew and friend Philip) who were followers of John the Baptist. (John 1:40ff) So was Jesus, prior to His own conversion. Then Jesus was baptized and came into much greater awareness of His true identity and purpose. At the instigation of John the Baptist, word began to spread among his followers that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. The point is that Peter was already “religious,” in his way. It seems clear that he and Andrew (and probably James and John and Philip) had been baptized by John the Baptist. He knew Jesus, though probably not much about Him yet. There is always preparation and inclination and history prior to conversion. God chooses the willing. God does not straight-arm the unwilling. Contact with God changes us, to be sure. But however much we may protest or claim total surprise, in some way we were asking for it. Are *you* asking for it? For further contact with God? Most people are not ... and then they wonder why God leaves them pretty much alone.

In my own mind, I try to picture what Peter was like. I picture him in his own day and time, yet he also reminds me of some of the people I know today: hard-working, with a big heart, and usually good-humored. I am sure he had a temper too! I suspect that he was well-liked. I imagine him to have been a bit scornful of the larger religious establishment (since he was involved with the reformer, John the Baptist), but he was probably also a member of the synagogue in Capernaum. I imagine him telling jokes, arguing about politics, and having a lot of strong opinions about Romans, taxes, and corruption in high places. I see him as a person who loved children, and who did not mind going out of his way to help a neighbor. Then one day, Jesus borrowed his boat for a while so He could get offshore just far enough to talk to the people about the Kingdom of God.

The impression we get is that Peter heard a lot of religious truth that day which he already believed. Only, he heard it put together with authority and power and challenge like he had never heard it

before. Things he had sort of believed and sort of tried to practice suddenly turned into a full-blown invitation and a summons. Jesus talked about a Kingdom that was unseen but more real than what was seen – a thing God was doing that would literally change the world, and the very nature of reality. What Peter had been trying to make a part of his life was now asking to be his *whole* life – and he was getting a glimpse of how living for this Kingdom was LIFE itself, and the only life worth having.

Is that not what happens when people *hear* the Word? What we have always believed, at least vaguely, one day jumps into focus – moves from tenth place into first place – and displaces a lot of things in the process. Very simple, in a way. And totally profound. What we had merely tried to include in our lives as something nice or ethical or helpful suddenly takes us over – and we feel the presence of God in and around us, where before it had seemed more like theory, or maybe just humanity’s better side trying to come to the fore. In any case, Peter heard the Word.

SECOND, Peter has an experience of the power and benevolence of God toward him personally. Conversion is never theory alone – never just intellect. Conversion is always encounter, personal experience. Naturally, that has to come in some form, some “language” we can understand. Peter is a fisherman. He had fished all night with no luck, and suddenly his boat is overflowing with fish. That gets his attention. He knows fish and fishing, and this is not normal! It happened *to* him, and for him, and there is no mistaking the presence of an unseen power.

You probably don’t want me to remind you of this, but generally speaking, the flashy miracles that come for our personal benefit happen early in our Christian pilgrimage. They are *not* the point or purpose of the Kingdom. They reveal God’s presence and power and personal affection. After that is made clear, God moves on to more important matters. The miracles get deeper and more to the point, but they do not entertain quite as well, unless you are talking to other pilgrims.

In this case, Peter has probably dreamed his whole life of making such a catch. Now that it has happened, before this day is over he will walk away from it all. The power behind such a catch is

bigger than the catch itself. “That for which a thing is such, the thing itself is more such.”

THIRD, Peter is undone. Logically, Peter would be begging Jesus to come fish with him every day. But this is too big for logic. Peter begs Jesus to leave. The reaction is strange, but classic. Peter is awestruck and astonished. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” Peter cannot believe this has happened to him. As the significance strikes home, he is filled with the sudden, full realization of his own unworthiness. There is no way to live up to a personal visit and gift from the Lord of Creation. The honor is too high. It cannot be handled. We all want God ... until we discover that God is real and present. Then it is suddenly too much for us. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” (Get me out of here!) Strange, isn’t it? We complain because God does not reveal himself more often and more clearly – yet from God’s side, we turn off or go “tilt” at every slightest glimpse he tries to give us.

FOURTH, Peter is reassured and commissioned. Peter’s unworthiness and sinfulness are not disputed. No debate here. It is obviously true. Only, that is not the point or the issue. Peter has heard the Word, and he has experienced a taste of the Word. God cares about him. He is invited in. “Do not be afraid – come work for me.” That is crucial. Without the invitation to share in the task, the experience would have been fake. The world is full of counterfeit conversions. Every authentic first conversion comes with an assignment. If it comes without an assignment, then the experience is self-induced, or emotionally induced by others.

The FIFTH step is the acceptance of the invitation and the assignment. God always leaves the final decision to us. Sometimes, as with the rich young ruler, we turn it down. In Peter’s case (and in Andrew’s and James’ and John’s), the response is clear and definite: “*They left everything and followed him.*”

Perhaps we need to mention that “leaving everything to follow Him” is not essentially a physical phenomenon. The assignment is not always in a different place, nor is it always a different function. But we are always called to do things with a different motive and purpose, and with a new understanding of how it fits into the Kingdom’s goals. Whether or not the “outside” looks different, the “inside” is always a whole new world.

I invite you this Lent to walk with Peter. Get to know him, read up on him, look beneath the surface, compare your own Christian pilgrimage with his. And when you see the pattern clearly on the individual level, do not stop there. See if the pattern fits also when you apply it to your family, your friendships, your business, your church. If the pattern is right, it will hold true on any and every level.

Peter moves into his new life with characteristic enthusiasm. He is delighted to be with Jesus, and hungry to learn and do everything he can for the Kingdom. He is enamored with Jesus' powers, and he participates joyfully in Jesus' preaching and teaching missions. He asks a lot of dumb questions, like: "Why don't you call down fire from Heaven on their heads?" Or, "How many times do I have to forgive somebody?" Or, "Can I come to you across the water?" (He was not nicknamed "Rock" for nothing.) Partly for this very reason, Peter seems to learn faster than the others. His faith grows, and so does his love and loyalty for Jesus. At this point, Peter is a good illustration of the happy convert. Following Jesus is a lark, even though a very meaningful, deep, and significant lark. And if you had asked Peter at this point, he would probably have said that the mark of a true convert is joy, enthusiasm, and optimism. He would tell you that life is full of miracles for true believers, that earthly success is God's will and pattern for the faithful, and that everything will work out fine if you just trust Jesus and truly believe.

And Peter would not be kidding because that is his experience thus far – he knows because it has happened to him. What he does not know is that there is still a great deal more to come. He is in Phase One – a true convert. He has moved from fisherman to disciple. He is a different man – a new person – with a different lifestyle, a new identity, a great message, and a dynamic new purpose for his life.

Does it seem to you that we have covered the full spectrum of conversion? If so, the coming sermons are especially for you. No doubt some of the initial enthusiasm and joy of this first conversion stayed with Peter for the rest of his life. And yet his story has barely begun! The Lord is not nearly finished with Peter, and a very great deal is going to depend upon him. May I suggest quietly and simply and in a friendly way ... that at this point, Peter is a rank neophyte. He is beautifully sincere and unmistakably dedicated, and without this first conversion, none of the rest of his story could have been

possible. But Peter is still a baby in the Kingdom. His understanding is shallow and his expectations are mostly earthbound, and almost entirely wrong. Despite his willing acceptance of his task as a follower of Christ, he is still completely oblivious to the real role he will be asked to play. It will be far larger and harder and more important than anything Peter has even begun to imagine.

To be sure, Jesus is very pleased with Peter, and He is content to work with him, teach him, love him, nurture him, and be patient with him while he is growing up. But today we see Peter in Phase One – the first conversion – FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE.

May I suggest quietly and simply and in a friendly way ... that we cannot be content to let our own stories stop at Phase One.