

May I speak in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

On my very first Sunday in the parish, just after being made a deacon, I'm charged with preaching on the patronal festival. No pressure there, then. But, starting as I mean to go on, I am not going to lie to you: I find Peter very annoying.

Peter is just a normal person, a fisherman, who shows great potential at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel when Jesus calls him to fish for people rather than fish. He downs tools and does as he is told, alongside his brother. Instinctively, and I think this is consistent throughout the biblical narrative, he trusts and believes in Jesus. It is when his pesky humanity gets in the way that his trust wanes. Just like when he sees Jesus walking on the water. When he is called to join Jesus he immediately gets out of the boat and walks towards him, but when he notices the wind and takes his gaze off of Jesus, he begins to sink.

Our Gospel reading for today sanitises a little of Peter's personality. The problem with cutting this reading off after Peter's commissioning which will lead to the entire church being built on him, is that it only leaves us with his proclamation: You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. This is a lovely episode, but it might be a little disingenuous to leave it there. In the verses that follow this exchange, we then see Jesus explain that he will die, and Peter (only reacting out of love, of course) totally missing the point and denying that this will happen. Jesus rebukes him for 'setting his mind on human things'. You may also remember that Peter denies Jesus three whole times in order to save himself when Jesus is arrested, even though he swore he wouldn't.

And so why do I find Peter so annoying?

I am learning to drive. It's a skill that clergy really ought to have, especially as parishes expand and some clergy, including myself, do not actually live in the parish in which they serve. The other week I was pretty confidently driving around Handsworth, quite pleased with myself, and I came to a roundabout. It was a busy time of day, I oversteered, and as I panicked my foot chose to press down on the accelerator. My lovely instructor took over the pedals, guided me around and then gave me some great advice. The first piece of advice he gave me: if you panic, take your feet off all the pedals and I will help you until you are ready

again. The second piece of advice: you will only learn if you make some mistakes. And he was right, if I hadn't made that mistake and realised my own tendency to try to carry on in a panic, I wouldn't have known what to do later on. The cheesy version of this, of course, is the phrase 'Jesus take the wheel'.

So, you see, Peter is so very annoying to me, because we hate in other people the things which remind us of ourselves. I know for a fact that I have proclaimed Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour in one breath, and then totally distrusted God's action in my life the next. Peter is not the most qualified, Peter is not even the favourite of the disciples! The beloved disciple gets all the love and Peter gets all the responsibility! Peter cannot stop himself from being very grand and acting like he's got it together, and then getting it so wrong. You have to feel sorry for Peter when he gets Paul having a go at him, as we read in both Acts and Galatians, no one deserves that!

And in our Acts reading today, Peter can't even really believe he's being rescued by the angels; he would rather believe it was some kind of spiritual vision than understand the enormity of God's power.

And yet, Peter loves. Jesus can see that enormous love that he has for him, and the instinctive faith that Peter shows. Peter, like Mary, says an immediate yes. Sure, he messes up later, because he is human, but his mistakes don't only teach him, they are still teaching us today. It is important to remember that when Peter started to sink on the water – he held his hand out and cried 'Lord, save me!' – what a fantastic example for us.

Reflecting on this leadership in the church as you are about to be ordained, since I wrote this sermon last week, is pretty daunting. When you are a member of clergy, your life becomes somewhat public. There is enormous pressure to appear perfect, and yet the model for priesthood and Christian life is Peter, the man who can't seem to get much right.

We are probably all a Peter figure for someone else, in fact we definitely are. There is most likely something we do which prods at someone else's insecurities about themselves and therefore we become the source of their annoyance. Without Peter, how would God ask us to look inside ourselves? There is a serious conversation to be had with our own hearts

when we find someone particularly annoying, and for us Christians I think Peter is someone God uses to help us notice our own humanity.

But, with Peter, it is not all doom and gloom in his humanity. I have one more biblical reflection on Peter. Let's try to imagine that we are Peter in John's account of the resurrection. It is dawn, and Mary Magdalene has told us that Jesus' body has been removed. Immediately, we, Peter and the beloved disciple set out to see for themselves. We run, desperately, hearts pounding, out of breath, racing to get to the place that Jesus had been put. The favourite gets there first, but can't seem to bring himself to go in the tomb. We, as Peter, step inside, wanting to be sure. Because Peter's love for Jesus wasn't just a feeling, it was an instinct. He didn't only have to get himself to the tomb, but he needed to go inside, to see it for himself.

If only we could all be so desperate to get to Jesus. I don't think we are supposed to look to Peter and see perfection, I think we are supposed to look to him to see where we ought to set our own instincts and intentions. And when we panic, when our hearts are pounding and we are inclined to go our own way as we sink beneath the surface, Peter reminds us to reach out and cry 'Lord, save me!'. His story might highlight our own shortfalls, but it also makes it clear that Jesus doesn't build a church on perfection, and that when we trust in him, nothing in our humanity can separate us from God's love, even when we feel like we're sinking. Amen.

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