

## Peter's denial of Jesus

Matthew 26:31-35, 57-75

Of all the twelve disciples, Peter is the one who follows Jesus furthest on the road to the cross. With the rest of the twelve he is at the Last Supper. He accompanies Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane and while Jesus prays conscious of the storm about to break over him, Peter sleeps like the others. When the Temple guards, led by Judas, arrive to arrest Jesus, Peter is soon awake, draws a sword that he has brought with him, perhaps sensing the tension in the air. With the other disciples, Peter flees as Jesus is taken under armed guard to the High Priest's house, but under cover of the half darkness of the early morning he returns and mingles with those gathered in the courtyard of the High Priest's house.

Through our readings and reflections on Peter over these past few weeks we feel we have got to know him. So often he is the first to speak and first to act; there's an infectious enthusiasm about the man: eager, impulsive, impetuous, bursting with self-confidence, but we've also seen that sometimes it is those qualities, combined with a misunderstanding about Jesus' mission, that again and again cause him to act and to say things that totally miss the point. So having acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, he is in the next breath rebuking Jesus for outlining the path of suffering and death that he has to take.

- Taken up the mountain where Jesus' glory is revealed, Peter is immediately talking about building shelters, and the voice from heaven says: *This is my Son, the beloved..... listen to him.*
- At the last supper Peter is saying that even if everyone abandons Jesus, he's ready to die for him, but is unwilling to allow Jesus to wash his feet.
- In the garden of Gethsemane, he sleeps, rather than prays, and he's armed himself, ready to fight until Jesus commands him to sheathe his sword.

Peter is not unique in his persistent misunderstanding of Jesus' mission as Messiah and his total opposition to the notion that He has to suffer and to die. We read in Luke, for example, that the Twelve disciples after Jesus has been very explicit about his fate in Jerusalem - his coming suffering and death - *understood nothing about all these things...they did not grasp what was said.*(Luke 18:34) For them a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron, a sign of complete and utter failure, and perhaps it is the sense of their being identified with a failure that encourages Judas to act in the way he did. Peter was willing to die for Jesus, but he could not accept that Jesus must die for him. He got discipleship all wrong. He was bound to fail. He had to learn through failure what Jesus himself was all about. He had to make a mess of doing things his own way before he could accept God's way. His failure was precisely God's opportunity.

And so we pick up the story again with Peter following in the half dark at a distance in the courtyard of the High Priest's house.

Is he scared?- He had every reason to be as a disciple of Jesus. Or is it that he doesn't want to be associated with a failed Messiah? Or is he embarrassed to be identified with someone he'd identified as Messiah, but who now so obviously is not?

Whatever the reason Peter fails Jesus as each time he is identified as a follower of Jesus, he more vehemently denies it. Just as Jesus had predicted, *Before the cock crows you will deny me three times* (Matt. 26: 34) we are told that following the third time, as he remembered Jesus prediction, *he went out and wept bitterly*. Peter the man, identified by Jesus to be the leader, broken, shattered, disillusioned, overwhelmed by his failure and lack of loyalty.

And yet it is just here, at the point of his deepest failure, that Peter can be found and be given a new beginning and the same can be true for us. The illusion that Peter with all his courage, initiative and devotion can save Jesus from death, be Jesus' greatest disciple, and make sure Jesus succeeds has been dispelled. Instead, Peter must see that for all his courage, initiative and devotion, he cannot be a disciple at all unless Jesus dies for him; for the cross is the way of God's grace for all of us and most especially for failures.

The dispelling of illusions is deeply painful; we can all identify with Peter's tears. But the story of Peter is a reminder that failure does not have to have the final word and does not disqualify us from being disciples of Jesus. Indeed acknowledgement of failure is a qualification for being a disciple. Peter's fine qualities were not wasted, they were not laid aside in Peter's new beginning, but he had to come to see the cross in a wholly new way; as he writes in his first letter: *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that free from sin we might live for righteousness.*(1 Peter 2:24)

Peter did become what Jesus had all along known he would be - the foremost shepherd of his flock - but only through failure, and only on the far side of the cross.

Again and again we come back to the cross. In our worship when we confess our failings; in the Eucharist, in Holy Communion, as we gather around the Lord's table. May we constantly discover it as the place where we can come as we are, with all our weaknesses and failings, and where we can find the grace to be what God calls us to be, in Peter's own words: to be *free from sin and live for righteousness*.

Turn on us your loving gaze,  
Jesus when we are dismayed,  
just your briefest glance can give  
courage, though we are afraid.

Turn on us your loving gaze.  
When our spineless fear denies  
all our loyalty to you,

sear our conscience with your eyes

Turn on us your loving gaze  
When we find ourselves ashamed  
by your glance of healing grace  
our allegiance is reclaimed.

Turn on us your loving gaze,  
and assure us of our worth  
till your love in human eyes

Heals and reconciles the earth.

*Alan Gaunt (b1935)*