

Upon This Rock

Introduction: Saint Peter sometimes appears a little rough around the edges. On a number of occasions his failure to understand is clear, but so too is Our Lord's acceptance of Peter "warts and all", as they say. It was out of human fear that Peter denied Jesus, but he never lost faith in him and was confident of Our Lord's understanding and forgiveness. Jesus saw important qualities in Peter, the rock upon which he founded his church, and after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter became its fearless preacher. He may not have been a particularly well educated man and yet there are some real theological and pastoral gems in his two New Testament letters - especially the first – perhaps the fruits of what we might today call "on the job training". It is some of these that I would like to explore in this paper.

You are new born, and, like babies, you should be hungry for nothing but milk – the spiritual honesty which will help you to grow up to salvation – now that you have tasted the goodness of the Lord. [1Peter 2 v 2-3]

Basically St Peter is saying that we shouldn't try to run (spiritually) before we can walk, but also that we should recognise what it is we have received from God and that we should hunger for that spiritual nourishment - Christ the bread of life, and not turn instead to (as we might say today) fad diets that promise much but deliver little.

He is the living stone...set yourselves close to him so that you too...may be living stones making a spiritual house. [1Peter 2 v 4-5]

The advice has to do with alignment, setting ourselves firmly on the foundation of the rock of Christ; ensuring that at all times we take him as our reference point. But in the words "set yourself close to him" there is a further suggestion that, like getting too close to someone with a cold, we should take the risk of "catching Christ" by our closeness to him. How else can we follow someone we don't know?

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. [1Peter 2 v 9]

To pick up on Our Lord's theme in the gospels: we are not to hide our light under a bushel. We have been called and chosen by God and now we must live to our full spiritual potential, unashamed of who we are as followers of Christ, and by the example of our lives hopefully attract others to want to discover for themselves the source of that light. It's that old question and challenge, that if it was a crime to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

It would have been better never to have learnt the way of holiness, than to know it and afterwards desert the holy rule that was entrusted to (us). [2Peter 2 v 21] *Do not behave in the way you liked to before you learnt the truth...be holy in all you do, since it is the Holy One who has called you.* [1Peter 1 v 14-15]

While we might sometimes feel disheartened by the new standard that Our Lord has set for us, he doesn't expect us to achieve it all in one go. It is a target to aim for, something to set our sights on. And when we fall short of that target all he expects of us is that we get up, learn from the experience, and try again. It's not the falling or the failing but the getting up again, and more to do with perseverance in hope than expecting perfection.

Once you were not a people at all and now you are the People of God; once you were outside the mercy and now you have been given mercy.

[1Peter 2 v 10]

These words of St Peter remind us not only of the unique relationship we now enjoy with God in Christ, but also the redemption he won for us and which is the basis of that relationship. Like the Prodigal Son we had lost everything, we had nothing, but now we have more than we could ever have dreamed of or hoped for because by his death and resurrection – his free gift which we didn't deserve but which he gave us anyway, Our Lord has bought back our lives, restored that relationship, and made everything right again - possibly even better.

Always behave honourably among pagans so that they can see your good works... God wants you to be good citizens, so as to silence what fools are saying in their ignorance... Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you have. But give it with courtesy and respect. [1Peter 2 v 12 & 16, 3 v 15] If you are a speaker, speak in words which seem to come from God; if you are a helper, help as though every action was done at God's orders; so that in everything God may receive the glory. [1Peter 4 v 11]

St Peter offers some basic advice on how best to carry out our baptismal mission to evangelisation and witness. We don't always react very well to people being "in our face" with their religious beliefs. In one sense they show commendable zeal, but if by turning people off it does more harm than good, then what is the point? Our faith witness will hopefully be far more effective if it is offered, yes with conviction, but sensitively, considerately, and (as St Peter says) with courtesy and respect. And our constant companion should be the Holy Spirit whom we invite in prayer to be with us and to work through us.

You spent quite long enough in the past living the sort of life that pagans live... so people cannot understand why you no longer hurry off with them to join this flood which is rushing down to ruin (and so) then they begin to spread libels about you. [1Peter 4 v 3-4]

Peter continues the theme of evangelisation and bearing witness to our faith. The fact that we are now followers of Christ means that things can never be the same again, we can no longer be like the "other people around us" [ref. 1Sam 8 v 5]. From time to time this is going to make life a little uncomfortable, at risk of

ridicule because of the faith principles that we stand up for and defend in speaking up for God and the things of God. Hence he goes on to say...

It is a blessing for you when they insult you for bearing the name of Christ, because it means that you have the Spirit of glory, the Spirit of God resting on you. [1Peter 4 v 14]

Unload all your worries in to him, since he is looking after you.
[1Peter 5 v 7]

The more we repeat and reflect on these words, the more we will appreciate how profound is the message they contain. Jesus is the ultimate “safety net” constantly stretched out below us, offering absolute reassurance and encouragement no matter what life brings our way. It is a reflection of the extent of his love for us that he is never going to leave us to fend for ourselves and is with us always and in all situations. St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans [8 v 32] “We may be certain, after such a gift (the life of his Son) that God will not refuse anything he can give.” In other words, why would he waste his time saving us if he wasn’t going to look after us?

Brothers (sisters), you have been called and chosen: work all the harder to justify it. [2Peter 1 v 10]

We can probably never “justify” all that God has done for us in the sense of deserving it – our justification is a grace, a free gift, from God. St Paul writes: “Both Jew and pagan sinned and forfeited God’s glory, and both are justified through the free gift of his grace in Christ Jesus.” [Romans 3 v 24] At the same time we shouldn’t get too down on ourselves or despair of our unworthiness, because the ultimate truth is that, as Paul says, God has made us worthy “not because of anything we ourselves have done but for his own purpose and by his own grace.” [2Timothy 1 v 9] St Peter’s invitation isn’t to work hard to *justify* our relationship with God in Christ, but rather to *appreciate* it.

There is one thing, my friends, that you must never forget: that with the Lord ‘a day’ can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises...but he is being patient with you all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways... Think of the Lord’s patience as your opportunity to be saved. [2Peter 3 v 8-9 & 15]

Jesus had spoken to his disciples about his second coming and, perhaps understandably, they fully expected it to happen fairly soon after his resurrection. When it didn’t, then St Peter found himself offering not only encouragement and reassurance to the members of the infant church, but, in a sense, a certain justification for things having not happened quite as everyone had expected. And, of course, the reality is that two thousand years later we are still waiting expectantly – or maybe not quite as expectantly as perhaps we should. With every day that passes, the odds of Our Lord’s second coming

happening grow ever greater, but are we any better prepared today than we were yesterday? St Peter's words that God may be waiting for "everybody to be brought to change his ways" suggests the possibility that, because he wants everyone to be saved and no one to be lost, the second coming may be being delayed not by God but by us because, even after the passage of two thousand years, the mission he gave us to evangelise our world is still woefully incomplete. Meanwhile...

God's power will guard you until the salvation which has been prepared is revealed at the end of time. [1Peter 1 v 5]

And following on from that thought, St Peter begins his first letter with a tremendous theological statement that sums up the basis of our relationship with God in Christ and states the great hope that we have as a result:

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy has given us a new hope as his sons and daughters, by raising Jesus Christ from the dead, so that we have a sure hope and the promise of an inheritance that can never be spoilt or soiled and never fade away, because it is being kept for you in the heavens... This is a cause of great joy for you. [1Peter 1 v 3-4 & 6a] *Go on growing in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory, in time and in eternity. Amen.* [2Peter 3 v 18]

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