

The Vision of Peter

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 11:1 to 18

Peter gave up a lot for his faith. He made sacrifices. I can think of three.

First of all he gave up his pride. That began when he betrayed Jesus outside the courtroom on Good Friday. (Luke 22:54-62) Three times he denied, once with swearing, that he even knew Jesus of Nazareth. But the hard bit was still to come. The hard bit was the forgiveness. The hard bit was when Jesus asked him 'do you love me?' - three times. (John 21:15-18) And three times Peter had to insist that he did. Jesus's response, three times, was to give Peter the responsibility of caring for his sheep. At that point, Peter knew that he was forgiven. But to accept forgiveness is hard. To forgive someone is to recognise that someone has done wrong. And to accept forgiveness is to recognise that I have done wrong. In accepting his forgiveness, Peter gave up his pride. From that moment he stood before God not as a proud man who could hold his head high, knowing that he could be relied on; he stood before God as a man who was forgiven. That was hard.

That was the first sacrifice that we know of. The final one was that he gave up his life. He was by no means the first: that was Stephen. (Acts 7:55-60) He was by no means the last: there will be people who died yesterday for their faith whose names will never be known. But being faithful unto death is not a sacrifice we can delegate, not a sacrifice we can pass on to somebody else and Peter made that sacrifice in Rome roundabout the year A.D. 64.

In today's reading we heard about yet another sacrifice made by Peter, sometime after he had been forgiven, and sometime before he was martyred. The sacrifice we heard of today was that of his way of seeing the world. We should not underestimate how big the sacrifice that was.

You see Peter was a good religious Jew. He saw the world fully from the Jewish point of view. He knew that the Jews were God's chosen people and that the Jewish way of doing things was God's way. They kept God's laws, they ate food that had been slaughtered in God's way and they avoided food that was not acceptable to God.

And for Peter, following becoming a follower of Jesus did not upset the apple cart, at least not at first. For the first few years of being a Christian, Peter and most others were still Jews: they worshipped in the Temple, they prayed in the synagogue, they kept the Jewish law and they had their sons circumcised. Being a Christian was about being a Jew but with something extra.

Then Peter had a dreadful dream - a nightmare. He dreamt he saw a sheet is being lowered from heaven full of animals of the kind that Jews were not allowed to eat. They were not kosher. But he heard a voice commanding him to kill and eat those unclean animals. Now we may feel rather squeamish about killing animals at all - unless you been trained as a butcher. But that wasn't what bothered Peter: he lived in more brutal times, when people were more in touch with the realities of eating meat. What bothered him was that those animals were unclean, they were not permitted according to the Jewish law.

Very few of us will associate regularly with Jews, but me might know a bot more about Islam, and what was being asked of Peter in his nightmare was a bit like offering a Muslim a bacon sandwich. And in his dream, Peter received the command to kill and eat three times. We don't know how Peter responded in the dream: Luke the author of Acts does not tell us. But the truth is, his response lay not within the dream, but within the real world. Very soon Peter discovered what the dream meant.

Three men knocked at his door and I think we might gather from the context that these men are not Jews. Before the dream Peter's natural reaction would have been to refuse their request to go with them to Caesarea. But he now understands the significance of the of the dream. It is not, at heart, about what food to eat or not eat. It is about which human beings to associate with. It is about who God's people are. And Peter now understands that in the future there is to be no distinction between Jew or Gentile. All are God's people.

It is not quite as dramatic as the conversion of St Paul. Peter was never murdering Christians. But his world is turned upside down. His life had been founded on the belief that there was a fundamental distinction between Jew and gentile. He now knows that is no longer the case and he acts accordingly.

Nothing has changed. Sacrifices are still needed to sustain the work of the church. Sacrifices are still needed to build the kingdom of God. Sacrifices are needed to make the world a better place. The ones we so often talk about our money and time. And money and time matter. But the fundamental sacrifice is giving up the way we see the world. It's about the footsteps. Every step represented by those footsteps signifies a sacrifice; every step involves giving up a way that we see the world and taking on a new one.

Let me talk you through them:

- When I take Step 1 I accept that the Christian church may be useful to me from time to time for my survival;
- when I take Step 2 I recognise that I may need the Christian church for my security and I am happy to pay for the cost of the bits of the church that I value;
- when I take Step 3 I recognise that the work of the church is actually important to me and so I will support it and see myself as a proper member of the churches supporters club;
- when I take Step 4 I see myself as a member who wishes to contribute a fair share of the costs -ml want to do my bit;
- when I take Step 5 I understand that as a disciple of Jesus Christ I should put God first in my life;
- when I take Step 6 I truly believe that God demands 'my soul my life my all' and so I give up my time and money naturally joyfully and sacrificially.

Each step involves me changing my view of the world. Just as Peter did in today's reading from acts. It is not easy. It involves a change in my mindset. It involves a change in the way that I use my money and my time.

So where are you? Are you in it for survival? For Security? As a Supporter? As a subscriber? Do you submit to Christ? Do you live sacrificially?

And, more importantly, where does God want you to be? What step is God calling you to take?

N Clews
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