



Faith: an expression of the spiritual self

An address for the Cosmic Mass ● 25th May 2008 ● Rev Louise

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a maid came up to him, and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the porch, another maid saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the cock crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Matthew 26:69-75

Two weeks ago we celebrated the event of Pentecost, and we're still feeling its impact and power. It's not over yet; there's still time for us take up what is offered to us at Pentecost.

Last week Rev Trish spoke about the spiritual power that is released at Pentecost, and that this power creates the conditions for our true spiritual nature to be revealed. Pentecost enables us to know our true spiritual self.

She said that: *If the power of Pentecost is at work in us then we are operating moment by moment out of the substance of our own spiritual experience and knowing.* In this Year of Faith, this seems to me to be a good definition of faith. From a deep knowing and experience of our spiritual selves we are able to live lives which are expressions of the Christ spirit within.

Spiritual identity

From a reading of the Acts of the Apostles, we can see that Pentecost is a time for our true spiritual nature to be revealed and to be expressed. This book is filled with events that speak of this: of the expression of the spiritual self, of what is possible for those who are identified with the spirit of Christ.

With what do we identify ourselves? Our earthly or our spiritual lives? Who are we? Who am I? At Pentecost we can come to know and experience our spiritual self and also become able to live this fully. If we have taken up our spiritual identity at Pentecost, then the answer to, "Who am I?" is "I AM." It is to know Christ.

Peter

One of the disciples who we see making this change at Pentecost is Peter, the disciple we associate with faith. In the first reading from Matthew, we see him denying Christ three times. In the version of this story that is recorded in the Gospel of St John, Peter's response to the question, "Are you not one of his disciples?" is, "I AM not."

At this point in meeting Peter, he is denying Christ and he is denying and rejecting the reality of his I AM, his spiritual nature and identity. It is quite shocking, and we know how Peter

suffers with this realisation. There are bitter tears of shame and humiliation, and he is no doubt genuinely horrified at what he has done.

In a moment where he could demonstrate his love and identification with Christ, he instead demonstrates weakness and cowardice. He keeps himself safe from possible harm. Peter has shown much bravado in the past, claiming his loyalty and faithfulness and yet, in this moment as Christ faces his journey to the cross, he experiences himself failing in this test of love. It is an overwhelming, sharp and poignant pain which Peter experiences.

Would we even know if we had denied Christ? If we did know, how would we respond? With bitter and poignant tears which contain a capacity to face the truth, or with self-condemnation or self-justification?

Peter – unstable in faith

In the gospels, we not only see the one who denied Christ, but we see a man who is afraid, who doubts. There are quite a few examples of this. Following the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples are in a boat crossing the sea.

And in the fourth watch of the night he (Christ) came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"
Matthew 14:25-31

Peter was doing all right; he could walk on the water, but became afraid. He couldn't sustain himself and his connection with his I AM; he doubted and so needing saving. Another moment of weakness in his faith. Then again in Matthew 16:13-20:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

So, things are looking good here for Peter. He knows Christ; he perceives the true nature and identity of Christ. His connection with spirit is strong. He is called the rock, the foundation, and told that he will be given the keys of the kingdom of heaven (this is where we get the image of Peter at the gates of heaven). And then the binding and loosing, the giving of spiritual power. It is marvelous. Then this happens in the very next verse:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen

to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men."

Ouch! One minute he is the holder of the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the next Christ rebukes him with, "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter here is not able to see the spiritual purpose of Christ and the suffering this will entail. He is a man whose faith is unstable; it comes and goes, to and fro. His faith is not yet a spiritual power alive within him and his attention is not on spirit but on the earthly concerns and consequences.

How Peter suffered! How excruciating it must have been to endure the clear knowledge of his failures and then the rebukes from Christ. Christ's response is telling. He is not easy on Peter; he is direct, he names what he sees, he calls a spade a spade. And Peter does not complain. How do we stand up to such truth being spoken? Can we hear it?

At this point, Peter's faith has a way to go! One of the stories along Peter's road to Pentecost and beyond is from the last chapter of the Gospel of John, chapter 21. It is following the events of Golgotha and the resurrection. The disciples have been fishing, with little success. Christ gives them some instructions about where to cast their net. Peter realises it is Christ and leaps into the sea, leaving the other disciples in the boat to bring the net full of fish to shore. They then have breakfast together.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep."

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

John 21:15-17

Peter denies Christ three times and then declares his love three times. There are some things that stand out from this passage which tell us about the growth of Peter's relationship with spirit and his strengthening faith. Throughout the gospels, Peter is known by a number of names: Simon, Simon Peter, Simon Bar-Jona (Matthew 16). In this passage, Christ names him Simon, son of John.

Listening

Simon we know is listening, and so immediately we know that listening is essential for faith to grow and strengthen. This was one of the themes of the Living Faith Retreat in April. Faith is a firm conviction based on listening and hearing; it is a knowing that comes from direct, firsthand experience. It is a capacity to listen to and act on the prompting of spirit.

When I was studying psychology years ago, one of the lecturers showed us a video of an interview with Carl Jung. In the interview, Jung was asked, "Do you believe in God?" He said, "No," which was disconcerting. He then added, "I know." His experience of spirit was an inner power; it was direct and firsthand experience; belief no more.

Faith and love

Peter is also named as the son of John. This tells us that it is from love that faith must grow. We can think for a moment about what faith might be, without love. Perhaps faith without love does bring us to belief and probably to dogma and fanaticism, less of an inner quality of knowing and more based on external belief with its imposition of rules and regulations.

A faith that grows from love includes service, a sense of responsibility and brotherhood, sacrifice and fellowship.

In naming Peter in this way, “Simon, son of John”, Christ is calling forth these qualities in Peter. He is calling on Peter’s capacity to listen to spirit and also to his love of spirit and the I AM which is within him. He is asking Peter to align and identify himself with these forces within him.

Constancy

In the three responses of Christ to Peter’s declaration of love, Christ says, in turn, feed my lambs, tend my sheep and feed my sheep. There is something tender in Christ’s commandments – tender, endearing towards his people. Peter is to be a source of spiritual nourishment, but also spiritual care; he is to be a shepherd and a minister.

We can perhaps see this repetition as meeting the triple denial of Christ. But it also has a sense of the ongoing nature of what is needed in the care and nourishment of souls. It is not something to be done once. Care and nourishment is ongoing; it requires persistence and a constancy. Christ could be saying, “If you love me, you will do as I have done, constantly.” Not here and there, to and fro, as Peter has done before.

Who Peter becomes

The man we meet in Acts, after Pentecost, is a changed and renewed man. There is authority, certainty, courage and boldness. He and John together heal a man lame from birth with the power of their gaze and the words, *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk* (Acts 3:1-11). A while later (Acts 9) Peter raises Tabitha from the dead. He kneels down beside her, prays and says, “Tabitha, rise.” She comes to life again.

And then a little later we see Peter as a man who is free from the laws of the time. He is able to show no partiality, to make no distinction. He says, “To the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18b). Christ is for everyone.

In the gospels we meet Peter when he is unstable in his faith and in his relationship with Christ and the I AM. But Peter’s faith becomes strong, active, making things happen. Peter becomes one who can heal, who can restore to life that which is dead and who can be free from old ways and see Christ at work in all people, regardless of race.

His identity is now that of Christ and his faith comes from his love for the I AM. He is no longer vacillating between his spiritual and earthly life. His earthly life has become an expression of his spirit. He is a man of authority and wisdom; a rock, a foundation on which something of spirit can be built. This spirit has many expressions. He is a leader, a teacher, a healer. He is a shepherd and a priest.

He is the one who can now say in response to the question, “Are you not one of Christ’s disciples?”, I AM. Peter is an inspiration to us. Often we would not know when we had denied Christ, but if we do, we can take heart from Peter. Pentecost does not just happen to Peter, he has suffered. This tells us something about the building of faith and our readiness for a Pentecost experience.

It takes listening to the spirit; it requires love in order to be born within us. There needs to be persistence and constancy. Peter also gives his all and has companions on the way. With these qualities, we too can become able to accept the power of Pentecost; we can change, and become foundations of Christ.

What is faith? It is experiencing and knowing our spiritual identity and reality. It is a spiritual substance which is living and active. It reveals who we are and urges us to act on this knowledge. At this time of Pentecost, our faith can be strengthened and it is possible for us to take up our true identity in Christ and act accordingly.

I'll conclude with a couple of verses from an 18th century hymn from Charles Wesley (1708-1788):

*The things unknown to feeble sense,
Unseen by reason's glimmering ray,
With strong, commanding evidence
Their heavenly, origin display.*

*Faith lends its realizing light,
The clouds disperse, the shadows fly;
The Invisible appears in sight,
And God is seen by mortal eye.*

So shall it be.

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