

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The right person for the job

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Introduction

Choosing the right people to do the job is not easy. Lots of applicants have glowing references. Lots of them know how to say the right things at an interview. If only we knew what they were really like. If only we knew everything so that we could infallibly make the right choices as to who should be chosen. We don't have that luxury, so it's no use complaining. Only God and Jesus can do that sort of thing. See what people are really like, choose just the right people for just the right job. Then again, how does that explain Judas? For that matter, how does it explain Peter?

Today, we are going to look at episodes in the life of Peter. We do so in order to find out how God relates to people like us. Because Peter is very much like us. We leave the mysterious, sinister figure of Judas aside and concentrate on someone with whom we can more easily identify. Peter, the hot headed one whose foolhardiness was matched by his cowardice, who could both be remarkably ignorant and remarkably discerning. Who could open his mouth to speak profound truth or to put his foot in it. How does Jesus deal with people like that, with people like us?

1.

Jesus called Peter to follow him, to leave fishing and start bringing men and women to Jesus. He is to be a disciple, a learner, an apprentice following his master and learning from his example. Following Jesus is not always easy. Jesus says and does some things that puzzle Peter and others. One such case was when he fed the multitudes with bread and fish. Afterwards, he taught that he was the bread of life. Many couldn't accept that teaching. They were happy to get fed literal bread, but all this talk about needing Jesus to live real life was another matter. So many turned away. Being right is not always the same as being popular. What they wanted he would not give, what he offered they would not receive.

Jesus turns to his inner circle and asks them if they too will leave him. Is it all too much for them? Peter acts as their spokesperson. They won't leave him. There is no alternative. Jesus is from God, that much Peter knows. He is the holy one, the set apart one, the man with a mission. He doesn't have a clear grasp of all the implications of this as we will see in the next episode, but he is not about to abandon Jesus because his understanding is limited or because others have done so. We don't have to know all there is to know or have our details just right in order to follow Jesus.

But we need to focus on something else going on here. There is a sense in which Peter is saying to Jesus: "Well, following you is pretty tough at times. You sometimes don't make much sense. You don't seem to make it easy for anyone. But we have to stick with you because you are God's Messiah. Staying with you is hard, Jesus, but we have no alternative. No one offers what you offer."

This is sometimes the bottom line of discipleship for us. Not the dramatic flourish of faith, the eloquent confidence of certainty. Rather the admission that if we think following Jesus is hard, the alternatives are even worse. Naturally, we don't want this to be the dominant feature of our Christian life. But there are times and seasons when this is about all we can muster. Jesus doesn't make sense. There seem no clear answers. Things are tough. So what do we do? Abandon our faith?

To do so would be the old case of jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Believing in the goodness of God in the midst of badness is a tough thing to do. But denying the goodness of God is not much help. Believing in the light of God in the midst of darkness is not easy, but believing that the darkness is all there is won't see an end to the darkness. As the old saying goes, better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

Sometimes faith is just clinging to Jesus by your fingertips. It is basically a refusal to panic. An acceptance that however hard it is to keep the faith, abandoning it is an even worse option. Fleeing to other religions won't help. Calling on the dark occult powers won't help. Believing just in yourself won't help. Arranging crystals or emptying your mind won't help. These are fundamentally dead ends because they leave out the person of Jesus. He is the holy one of God, he is our Saviour and our good shepherd. He is the bread of life. Following Jesus will not be easy, but he will at least get you to your created destiny, which is to be a child of the living God, now and always.

2.

Another episode in the life of Peter concerns his walking on the water. Jesus was walking on the water one night and appeared to the disciples. Peter figured he could try that too, and asked Jesus to invite him to do so. Peter went OK at first, but then he looked at the stormy sea and logic and common sense took over. He was walking on water, and human beings don't do that: they sink in water. So Peter floundered till Jesus took hold of him. Jesus asks him why he doubted. Jesus is not rebuking Peter for doubting he could walk on water. Rather, he rebukes him for not believing Jesus could sustain him. Doing the impossible out of impulsiveness or bravado is one thing. Doing the impossible at the invitation of Jesus is another thing. What Jesus commands he enables. He doesn't ask us to do the impossible without making it possible.

Peter's experience here teaches us something else. When we look to Jesus we are safe. When we take our eyes off him and get focused on circumstances, we are unsafe. If our lives are shaped by changing circumstances, we are destined to fluctuate forever. We lack a solid centre and will not know from one day to the next what sort of person we will be. There will always be something around the next corner to threaten us or elate us. We are passive victims of life.

Focus on Jesus and his presence in all circumstances, and there will be a security, solidity, and consistency about us. We will have a solid core of faith which will give us integrity. Not that our circumstances will change. But the way we handle them will. By all means pray for a change of circumstances, but pray even more for the grace to approach all circumstances from a faith perspective. We can go crazy trying to bend circumstances to our will. Better to stay sane and ask God to be with us no matter what.

The next episode is the confession of faith made by Peter. Jesus invites his followers to say what they believe about him. Peter, again the spokesperson, says Jesus is the sent one, the Son of God. No fiddling around with Jesus being a good man or a wise teacher. He is God in the flesh. What we think of Jesus determines whether or not we are Christian. He is God in human form come to reconcile us to God. He is not one of the many exalted ones, he is **the one** exalted one. Christians don't think Jesus is pretty important. He is all-important.

Even so, Peter didn't quite understand what it all meant. He figured Jesus was the Messiah, but didn't know what sort of Messiah he would be. Jesus tells Peter that his sort of Messiahship meant him dying on the cross. This doesn't suit Peter at all. He objects. In this he is much like those who "sort of" believe in Jesus, but are not all that keen on all his teaching, on all his conclusions. They like the idea of friendship with God, they like the idea of forgiveness, but the cross is a great offence. Someone dying for our sins is a great offence.

Jesus reacts strongly. He tells Peter he is a tool of Satan, tempting him to take the easy road to Messiahship. Well-meaning Peter has got some of the truth but not all of it. Even so, Jesus tells this same man that he would be a rock like figure in the church. Even knowing he would later betray him, Jesus still gives Peter responsibility.

3.

Before Jesus was arrested and Peter got a chance to show how loyal he was, there was the small matter of the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asked his followers to stay awake and pray for him at his hour of crisis. Peter and the others promptly fall asleep. Again, Jesus doesn't lash out at those who fail him. How sad it is that our great heroic statements of faith and confidence can end up in us simply falling asleep, fatigue triumphing over faithfulness.

Peter does it again when the officers come to arrest Jesus. He lashes out with his sword. He slept rather than prayed, so when the crisis came, he didn't react the right way. He went back to type. He rushed in without thinking. He mistook bravado for bravery. We pray not so much to avert a testing situation, rather that we will know how to act in that situation.

And then Jesus was taken away. Peter is asked three times if he is a follower of Jesus. Three times he denies the fact. Jesus as he was being led away looked at Peter. Probably a look of sad understanding. No wonder Peter wept. This weeping disciple is close to each of us. We promise much and fail to deliver. We sleep rather than pray. When the crunch comes, we revert to type and sometimes don't act any differently to those who don't follow Christ. We point the fingers at others and ask how it is they can act that way as Christians. Jesus looks at us and loves us. Saddened, but not giving up on us.

We know from the life of Peter that Jesus doesn't give up on us. After Jesus' resurrection, beside the lake, Jesus calls Peter aside. It looks like it could be an exit interview, Jesus telling Peter to get back to fishing. He had failed the test of discipleship. He was off the team. Or perhaps something less drastic. Maybe a lecture on commitment and team play.

It was nothing of the sort. It was rather an invitation to journey on. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Peter tells him he does three times. Having denied him three times, Peter is invited to recommit himself to Jesus three times. Why doesn't Jesus ask Peter about commitment? Why not some talk about leadership or being part of a team? Why not mention of faith and obedience?

Jesus gets to the heart of things when he speaks only of love. If we truly love God, imperfect though that love is, then that is the basis for all else. If we genuinely care about Jesus, genuinely long for intimacy with him, genuinely want to go his way, then that is enough. If Jesus can be assured of our love for him, he can get to work on any amount of cowardice, foolishness, frailty, and selfishness.

And we need not try to summons up more love than what there is. We give to God what love we have and pray he will fan those fading embers into something fiery and passionate. He will not break a bruised reed, he is gentle with our frailty. Give to God what you have and let him make it more, rather than hide from him till you try to make it more yourself.

In this same dialogue, Jesus not only asks Peter three times if he loves him, he also three times gives Peter responsibility. Jesus wants this failure to lead his church. Jesus leaves the people for whom he died in the hands of a loud mouthed coward whose love for God is nothing to write home about.

Conclusion

Peter is given the task of taking care of God's people. He will feed them truth. He will care for them with love. He will guide and protect them, encourage and even rebuke them. He may have failed at times, but he was not a failure as a man.

Peter was not destined for the scrap-heap and nor are any of us. When we stumble and fall, Jesus doesn't walk on by with a frustrated shake of his head and look for someone better. He stops and picks us up. He gives us a job to do. To fail is not to finish our journey, it is to make a new beginning on it.