

LENTEN PROGRAMME
“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”
Week 5, 2021 – Luke 22. 31-34, 54-62 [ESV]
Redemption and Salvation – Peter
[Adapted]

GATHERING

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, you forgave and restored Peter, who denied he ever knew you; you forgave and restored your friends who fled away when you most needed them. Save us from the sin of Judas, of thinking that our thoughts and actions, however terrible, are too terrible for your forgiveness. All that can keep us from your forgiveness is unrepentance or pride - save us from both, and purify us in the furnace of your love, which throws light on our misdeeds so that we can see ourselves as we truly are, but then burns them up so that we can start forgiven and afresh in your footsteps. Amen.

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

[Luke 22. 31-34, 54-62]

'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.' Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.'

Then they seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, 'this man also was with him.' But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' And a little later someone else saw him and said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not.' And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, 'Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about: And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me" three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

Poem: Peter's Word

Jesus was right, again,
when he said:
Peter, there is a word that you use
which reveals the path you must tread
a little word, a nothing word it seems
but (there it is) a word which screams
of denial, betrayal, resistance and pride
a word behind which excuses can hide.....

Then the girl's question, my panic and lie
she replied: 'Your accent betrays you
You are one of his men.'
'But I tell you I don't know him,' I shouted again.
I moved to the shadows, away from the flames
hiding my tears, my meltdown, my shame.
'No, I've seen you together, certain I am.'
So I cursed and swore 'But I do not know the man.'

I weep, I wretch with guilt and pain
I too have betrayed you Lord, blasphemed against your name
three times the cock crew
just as you said, just as you knew.
We have come so far and shared so much
now I would give it all for the warmth of your touch
a healing word for me, your hands to raise me up
bread broken together, a shared communion cup.

Suddenly, haloed in torchlight you came
beaten and bloodied, bound like a lamb
and across the courtyard's smoke-filled haze
you seemed to search for me with a merciful gaze
no if's no but's, just a look of pure grace
was that meant for me, Lord, my sin to erase?
Jesus, I beg you, on my knees I implore
you have forgiven so many, please forgive one more.

Please take a few moments in silence to reflect on the passage and the poem.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE [Rt. Rev. Dr. Hosam Elias Naoum]

The poem, 'Peter's Word,' takes us poignantly inside the heart of the leader of the Twelve Apostles, the very rock upon which Jesus was going to build his church (Matt 16:18). But in Peter's cowardly denials of Jesus, a crack suddenly erupted down the middle of that once proud rock. Fear overpowered Peter's love of Jesus, leading him to both abandon and disavow his Master.

But when the cock abruptly crowed, its shrill sound stabbed at Peter's heart. In horror, he realized what he had done: he had denied his Lord three times, just as Jesus had predicted only hours before. As the full weight of that betrayal came crashing down upon him, Peter staggered out of the high priestly courtyard, weeping bitterly (Matthew 26:75).

As we have said and as the Gospels record, Jesus knew in advance that all this would happen. But not only did Jesus foretell Peter's denials at the Last Supper, he also did something more. Jesus prayed for Peter: 'Simon, Simon; Jesus said, using the Apostle's given name, 'Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat; but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail' (Luke 22:31-32).

And so Jesus came to Peter in his weakness. Knowing that his disciple would not pass the coming test of his faith, Jesus nevertheless held him up in prayer, not only accepting him with all his soon-to-be-revealed faults, but also envisioning for him a time of repentance and renewal through the power of God's grace. This last truth can be seen in the final part of what Jesus said to Peter at the Last Supper, which is actually a command: 'And you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:32).

Jesus' words here reverberate later on after his Resurrection. That's when he met his disciples one morning on the shores of the Sea of Galilee after they had hauled in a miraculous catch of fish. At the conclusion of their breakfast, Jesus took Peter aside and asked him, 'Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?' He did this three times, once for each of the denials. After Peter replied each time in the affirmative, Jesus said (with some variation), 'Feed my (little) sheep' (John 21:15-17). Jesus then predicted that Peter would indeed walk the way of the cross for the remainder of his life, finally joining with his Lord in a death like his (John 21:18-19). As we know from the Acts of the Apostles and Early Church tradition, this is indeed how Peter's life would proceed. Peter would in fact follow Jesus for the rest of his life, working tirelessly to feed the Lord's sheep.

For me, one of the most comforting and reassuring things in these accounts is Jesus' great compassion towards Peter, even in the midst of his flaws. Here, it is heartening to know that, as with Peter, Jesus comes to us in our weakness. And when he does so, he does not condemn us. Instead, he prays for us. He reaches out his hands in love to pull us off the ground comforting us in the midst of our grief over our sins. But then he also challenges and empowers us to move beyond our shortcomings so that we do not focus upon ourselves and our own inner desires, but instead upon meeting the needs of others. As Peter's later life revealed, such transformation is truly possible by the power of God's amazing grace.

This mission of tending to the needs of others is especially important for us here in the Holy Land, for there are many individuals and families in our region in such desperate plight, spiritually, emotionally, and economically. Our work in 'feeding the sheep' of Christ here is as essential now as it was 2,000 years ago. And so we continue to follow in the footsteps of Peter, who began his journey of faith from here in Jerusalem at Pentecost, working to proclaim, by word and deed, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in places both far and near.

Short Reflection on Scripture and the Poem

(see also Mark 14: 27-31; 66-72)

Having reflected on the betrayal by Judas and on John's loyalty, we return to betrayal - this time by Peter. The poem tries to show that this did not just come out of nowhere but was like a seemingly small crack in a rock-face which suddenly, under tremendous pressure, fractured and split apart the whole mass of rock. This causes a catastrophic landslide, an almost complete meltdown in Peter.

Please take a few moments of silence to reflect on what you have read.

Question for Reflection

What is it, do you think, which allows Peter to pull back from the edge of despair unlike Judas?

Does Peter's experience in any way connect with an experience in your own life?

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray to Christ the Lord, who gave us the new commandment to love one another.

R: Lord, may your people grow in love.

Good master, teach us to love you and to serve you in our brothers and sister.

R: Lord, may your people grow in love.

You interceded with the Father for those who nailed you to the cross; help us to love our enemies and pray for those who injure us.

R: Lord, may your people grow in love.

Through the mystery of your body and blood deepen our courage and faith, strengthen the weak comfort the sorrowful, and fill the dying with new hope.

R: Lord, may your people grow in love.

Teach the faithful to be united with your passion in times of trouble and distress; let the power of your salvation shine forth in their lives.

R: Lord, may your people grow in love.

Lord, giver of life, remember those who have died; grant them the glory of your resurrection.

R: Lord, may your people grow in love.

In the silence of our hearts let us bring to the Father our thanks [pause]

In sorrow let us ask the Father for forgiveness [pause]

With confidence let us entrust to the Father our cares and concerns [pause]

Almighty God, by the cross and resurrection of your Son you have given life to your people. We have received the sign of the cross: make us living proof of its saving power and help us to persevere in the footsteps of Christ. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Acknowledgement:

“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”

[You may wish to purchase a physical copy directly from Friends of the Holy Land or obtain an electronic/digital version (also priced £7.99), both of which are available from their website: www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk

The proceeds of this book (priced at £7.99 plus postage and packaging) will go to the Friends of the Holy Land to aid their work with the neediest of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. As with those closer to home, our brothers and sisters there have suffered dramatically during the coronavirus pandemic, including economically with the cessation of pilgrimages and tourism and the resulting loss of income]