

## NEW TESTAMENT PERSONALITIES

### "III. PETER"

INTRODUCTION If I were to ask you to name all twelve disciples of Jesus, the chances are that you would begin your recital of the list with the name of Simon Peter. Maybe it's because all of the Gospel lists of the twelve disciples began thus with the name of the big fisherman. And maybe it's because so many of us instinctively identify ourselves with this stumbling, bumbling disciple. I've never forgotten a rugged and wrinkled farmer in the church I served one winter in Vermont while I was in college. He never said much about his faith, but one day he said this much - "That fellow Simon Peter...he's for me....because I'm so much like him". To be sure many people have seen in "Simon whom Christ surnamed Peter" the symbol of their best aspirations and their poorest performance.

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And so they grew up with these differences in their personalities. Simon - big, blustering, profane, long on popularity, but short on respect. Andrew - quiet, plodding, thinking, searching. We spoke last Sunday of Andrew's introduction of Simon Peter to Jesus. I've often wondered how it happened that Simon accepted Andrew's invitation to meet Jesus. Did he go along simply to placate the whims of his brother, or out of a sense of curiosity, or was there something lacking in his own life, some wistful longing for a sense of direction for a life that was fast leading nowhere? However it may have been, there was something about a look, something about a love, something about a word that pierced the gruff and tough exterior. "You are Simon.....from now on your name is ..... Peter ... 'a rock'".

DISCIPLESHIP Even so, if we correctly piece together the Gospel accounts, this was not the beginning of Peter's real discipleship. It was rather the founding of a friendship, and after that the fisherman went back to his boats and nets until one morning, some time later, Jesus appeared on the shores of Galilee to greet a group of fishing coming in, empty handed and exhausted. Remember the incident. The Master's voice gave them a new lift. His insights directed their efforts in another way. And at dawn they were amazingly successful. Then it was that Jesus extended the invitation to discipleship. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men". Simon was completely overwhelmed by that. He, with his record of fumbles and failures, how could he become a disciple, an ambassador

of this paragon of perfection? With a reaction which most of us will readily understand, he blurted out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord". But Jesus would not let go and persisted until he "left everything and followed him".

But still the road of discipleship was a rocky one. Simon did not become Peter and readily as Saul became Paul. The old traits did not tame easily. He had talked about everything so long and so loudly that he did not suddenly become a model of restraint and discretion in his speech. I'm fond of that reference in Mark's Gospel to some exclamation of Peter, and then this editorial comment, "For he did not know what to say...." Some of us are like that, not knowing what to say, we promptly go ahead and say it anyway. Like the lady whose husband was forever trying to restrain her from rambling on every subject. "But" she replied to him, "How do I know what to think about a subject, until I have heard what I have to say on the matter". Peter was like that.

Or Peter had been so use to running the show that he was not about to become a subdued private in the ranks. He thought the disciples needed a little organization, and he knew he was just the man for the job. He thought the Master needed someone to handle his appointments and arrange itineraries, and if he did say so himself, he was a bit of an organizer. It was Peter who tried to discourage Jesus from paying any attention to the women who touched his robe in the crowd. It was Peter who tried to set Jesus straight about the cross, "God forbid, Lord". "This shall never happen to you". I've always had the suspicion, too, that it was Peter who tried to shoo the children away from Jesus - the self-appointed secretary of appointments. Simon had so much to learn from the mind and heart of Jesus.

But for all of Simon Peter's rough edges, the man seemed to have had a special place in the affections and expectations of Jesus. Simon Peter it was, who with James and John formed the trio that Jesus turned to most frequently as companions and confidants. Simon Peter, it was, who before any of the other disciples began to understand something of Jesus' particular mission in life. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you Simon... for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven'". And if later we had been in the Upper Room for the Last Supper, we should surely have been impressed as Peter declared his loyalty to his Lord. "Though they all fall away.....I shall never fall away"

#### A SORRY CHAPTER

What followed between the darkness and the dawn of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday is generally considered as one of the sorriest chapters in the life of Peter. Perhaps we have overdone the condemnation. Certain it is that we have overlooked some factors. For one thing, Simon alone of all the disciples tried to follow Jesus after his arrest. It took courage, more than the others had. Perhaps (as Weatherhead suggests), Simon went to the courtyard as a spy, seeking information that on the morrow he might use in behalf of Jesus. If that were the case, his first denial was simply in keeping with his role. The only thing was that his accent gave him away, and confronted with that blunder, he panicked, started to curse and swear, and soon was deeper in trouble than he knew how to handle.

Whatever did happen there that night, it is worth remembering that neither the risen Lord nor the other disciples seemed to think that in any way it disqualified him from the position of preeminence that later he attained.

You know the rest of the story. It was Peter, among the disciples, who first became aware of the fact of the Resurrection. It was Peter who was the great preacher of the early Church - the great healer, the great leader. There is a lovely compliment paid Peter in the Book of Acts. People would try to maneuver themselves into position - "so that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall upon them". And some were healed. Tradition has it that Peter and Paul both met martyrdom in Rome at about the same time under Nero. Certain it is that the last year's of his life magnificently confirmed the prediction: "You are Simon...from now on your name is...Peter...a Rock".

#### INSIGNIFICANCE INTO IMPORTANCE

Now the lessons from this man's life fairly tumble forth and call to us as we live with his story. Suppose we consider three of them. To begin with, this story of Simon reminds again that the Master can transform insignificance into importance. It's true that the name of Simon Peter (and the other disciples, too) would never have appeared in the list of "Who's Who In Galilee". They were just a group of nobodies without any promise of becoming somebodies. And Simon, for all of his bluff and bluster, knew that he was a nobody. "Depart from me, for I am...a no good nobody, Lord." And back came the answer, "You are Simon...you shall be Peter...the rock" Only a Master's touch could lead him from one to the other.

We say that "pride goeth before a fall". Yes, but with some it is not pride, but a feeling of inferiority that trips them up and knocks them down. Faced with demanding assignments, we quiver and say, "Who, me....I can't do that". Laded with responsibilities, give up and say, "That's too much for me". Handed some handicap, we get feeling sorry for ourselves and cry out, "I can't take this". Ah....strong Son of God have we never really met you and know you that we should be so blind to the possibilities within us?

In Irving Stone's biography of Michelangelo, an arrogant nobleman gazes at one of the sculptor's masterpieces and asks the artist, "How did you come to make that astonishing figure of night". To which Michelangelo replies, "I had a block of marble in which was concealed that statue which you see there. The only effort involved is to take away the tiny pieces which surround it and prevent it from being seen. For anyone who knows how to do this, nothing could be easier". "Then" says the nobleman, "I shall send my servant to look for statues in the stones."

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#### COMBATIVENESS INTO COURAGE

But again, the story of Peter reminds us that the Master transforms combativeness into courage. There's a tremendous difference. All of us seem to be endowed with a certain amount of native combativeness

and pugnacity. One little lad, tired of being called "mother's little lamb" rebelled and cried out, "Don't call me a lamb; call me tiger". In every person, there is something of this tiger quality. Unbridled and untrained, though, it can make a mess of our lives. It can be destructive rather than constructive. It can make young people delinquent; it can make defiant agitators, defacing houses of worship and burning crosses. It can make bitter adults who are always complaining and finding fault with something. And in our lesser, tired moments it can make all of us contentious, hard to get along with, prone to compose in our imaginations fierce and ferocious conversations with those we do not like and vitriolic letters to those who have hurt us.

Simon was like that at the start of his discipleship. He loved a fight. Even after he became a disciple, he was still bristling; nobody was going to get to see Jesus without talking with him first. No town was going to deny the disciples hostility without suffering for it. No cross was going to claim his Master but that he would see about it. But little by little, the Master refined that raw element in his nature into the constructive courage of the man who won the right to be the first great leader of the Church.

We have not seen or touched the power of the Gospel in our lives if we do not glimpse something of Christ's ability to change and to channel an aimless pugnacity until it become a strong courage at his direction. One of the miracles of Christianity is the way in which a bristling, blustering person like Peter can become a determined, dependable, disciple of Jesus Christ.

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One answer to all our doubts about the possibility of positive results of such a prayer is to be found in people like Peter whom the God of our Lord has guided from shifting sand to rocklike dependability.

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PRAYER      And now, O God, may the spirit that was in thy servant Peter be also in us....that in our moments of temptation, our times of decision, we may not fail Him who is counting on us. We ask this in the spirit of Him who everything for us. Amen

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