



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, August 30, 2020**  
*The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Solemn Eucharist*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Jeremiah 15:15-21 and Matthew 16:21-28  
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### **How to live who we are; how to make true our deepest self.**

A Vestry was struggling to come to a common mind about the search for their new rector; they simply had too many qualities for their personal specification and could not agree which ones to let go. Should the new rector be an amazing preacher? A gifted pastor? A phenomenal fundraiser? An exemplary manager? Getting exasperated with all the time it was taking, the Bishop said to the Wardens, “Listen, let’s try looking at it from a different angle – I *do* have someone in mind and it might be an interesting fit. However, are you sure that you don’t want an *un*-educated person?” “No!” “And I thought I heard that you don’t want someone from the lower classes?” “No!” “How about someone who has a history of making mistakes but learning from them?” “Definitely not!” “But would you consider someone who sometimes had problems with loyalty but eventually came around?” “No!” “What about someone who did not always tell the truth but was able to face up to their failures?” “Absolutely not.” “Clumsy with her words?” “Look!” said one of the wardens, “are you telling me that *you* would employ someone with all those flaws?” “Hmmm,” mused the Bishop. “Unfortunately, you just failed to short-list Saint Peter!”

Peter looms large in the Gospel narrative and that means that we get a wonderful glimpse into his life which, sometimes, seems very conflicted; his weaknesses as well as his strengths; his failings as much as his successes. Perhaps that is why Peter is so attractive to Christians, and particularly those in the ordained ministry. Peter is not an erudite, learned scribe or Pharisee – the people that you might expect Jesus to have chosen as his followers but, then again, Jesus grew up in the North in a no-body kind of town (Think Nathaniel - “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”). So, Jesus the carpenter chose Peter the fisherman – he saw his potential in spite of his lack of qualifications or general demeanor. The relationship of Jesus with Peter is a powerful one, and over the past few weeks we have heard some amazing stories from the Gospels.

When the disciples were battling against the waves in a boat, and saw Jesus walking to them on the water, Peter with his usual impulsive nature suggests the impossible; “*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*” (see Matthew 14:22-33). And Jesus said, “*Come.*” We all know the next scene – it is dominated by Peter crying out “*Lord, save me!*” but we forget that the scripture tells us that Peter was, indeed, **walking on the water**. That encounter changed him but, as we see time and time again, Peter’s humanity gets the better of him, and he gives in to his fear.

Last week, we heard of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (see Matthew 16:13-20) in which that spark of intuition was fanned into full flame as Peter exclaimed from his heart and soul “*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” And for a moment, in that moment, Jesus and Peter were one in ecstatic joy.

How quickly, though, Peter falls. One minute he is able to embrace the truth of who Jesus is; the next he is refusing to align himself to his mission.

But this is not new. In our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we read of how God welcomes back those who stray and how he invites people to turn around – which, of course, means *repent*.

*“If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth.”*

Those words are a prophecy that seems to point to Peter’s life and relationship with Jesus. One moment he is confessing Jesus as the Christ and Son of the Living God, the next he is remonstrating with him and protesting about talk of Jesus’ death; *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* Jesus’ rebuke is sharp and sudden and reminds us of the temptations he suffered in the wilderness – *“Get behind me, Satan!”* The one who had been renamed Peter – the rock – is now becoming a stone that the Lord will trip over, causing him danger; *“If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth,”* says Jeremiah. *“You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,”* says the Lord. As Father Moretz reminded us last week, *“Peter spoke the truth, but as more is revealed, he recoils from the vision of truth, and even seeks to snuff out that light, trying to turn Jesus away from his mission.”*

This common theme of faith and doubt – of strength and failure – is a hallmark of Peter’s journey with Jesus; great moments of insight suddenly crushed by stupidity or fear.

I am always moved by the poignant passage towards the end of Luke’s Gospel when, after the arrest of Jesus, Peter stood in the courtyard of the High Priest warming himself by the fire. After twice denying him, a third passer-by accused him and Peter denied Jesus a third time. Luke writes: *“At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. **The Lord turned and looked at Peter.** Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.* (Luke 22:61)

Were those tears a turning point for Peter? Only a few days later, by another charcoal fire, Jesus would look intently at Peter again and ask his friend, *“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”* Significantly, Jesus does not use the nickname of the rock. Peter would see the marks of the nails and the spear – the wounds of love still fresh that he once tried to prevent, even taking up a sword in the garden of Gethsemane. Perhaps he began understand at last that it was through *acknowledging* our weakness that we can find inner strength. He discovered the glory of God in the eternal freshness of the wounds of love.

The late spiritual giant, Henri Nouwen, spent nine months in a Trappist Monastery searching for a glimpse of God’s glory, searching for a deeper understanding of who he was and what he could become. His spiritual director asked him to turn the question on its head. *“The question is not so much ‘how to live for the glory of God?’” he said, “but, ‘how to live who we are, how to make true our deepest self?’ If the glory of God is not there where I am, where else can it be?”*<sup>1</sup>

St Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians *“We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”* (2 Corinthians 4:7) The clay that is the frailty of our human nature, can become a sign of the glory of God through our relationship with Jesus Christ. The discovery of the glory shining through human weakness transformed Peter so much that eventually, people even laid the sick in the streets in the hope that Peter’s *shadow* might fall on some of them as he passed by. (see Acts 5:15)

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus said, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”*

However, the hard fact remains that we need to know our deepest, inner self, if we are to deny it!

After his resurrection and his restoration of Peter, Jesus gave a chilling prophecy that Peter would also pay the ultimate price for his admission of love: *“when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”* (see John 21:18)

If you have ever been to Rome, you may not have travelled to the outskirts of the city, but there you will find the ancient, wide and straight road called the *Appian Way*. There, a little way from the catacombs is the little church called *Quo Vadis*. We know that Peter lived in Rome not far from where that little Church now stands. Tradition says that during the terrible persecution of Nero, Peter was fleeing Rome on the Appian Way when he met Jesus. Peter said to Jesus *“Lord, where are you going?”* (*“Quo vadis, Domine?”*) to which Jesus replied, *“To Rome to be crucified again”* at which point, it is said, Peter turned around and returned to his role of tending the lambs, and feeding the sheep. Shortly after, he was one of those martyred by Nero in the Circus that used to stand near where St Peter’s Basilica now stands.

In the eyes of the world, Peter lost his life but in reality, he gained everything because he was not afraid of facing his inner, conflicted self and glimpsed the glory of Jesus. The Church is built on the rock of Peter’s faith, but it was that faith that brought Peter eternal life.

Beneath St Peter’s Basilica, there is a great crypt where the popes are buried – the good, and the not so good. But underneath that, is the ancient Necropolis – the city of the dead – excavated in the late 1940s, which was next to the Circus of Nero and where Peter was buried after his own crucifixion. The building of that great Church over the bones of Peter was a very natural thing to do by the Emperor Constantine (*“on this rock I will build my Church”*). But the Church, as the Body of Christ, is built on Peter’s *faith*. Many people have wondered about the authenticity of the bones discovered there, but perhaps that is not what really matters. Near Peter’s tomb, there is a little red wall and it is covered with graffiti: the Greek symbol *Chi-Rho* – the first two letters of the word ‘Christ’ – then the Greek words, *Petros, Thanatos, and Zoe - Peter, Death and Life*.

The first time I visited the necropolis under Saint Peter’s, I was anxious to get to Peter’s tomb – to be near the remains of the great Saint – near the Rock-man. But when we did eventually get to his tomb, the guide left me speechless as he explained what many archaeologists think the graffiti means – *‘Do not be afraid of death. Peter will lead you to Christ, who is life.’* Our guide turned to us, paused, then said, *“And isn’t that more important than if these are the bones of Peter?”*

<sup>1</sup> See, ‘The Genesee Diary’ pages 70-71