

Trinity College Cambridge

9 February 2014

## PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Peter

2 Samuel 22: 17–30    John 21: 1–19

Monsignor Mark Langham

Of all your preachers this term on the People of the New Testament, I have perhaps the easiest task. After Jesus, Peter is the figure most prominent in the gospels, the most fleshed-out personality. He appears in all four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, is mentioned in three letters of Paul, and is given as author of two letters. The picture that emerges from these texts varies in some details, but overall forms a strong, coherent image, a believable person, who (one suspects) was considerably more pleasant than Paul; a figure whose reputation and authority have created a lasting legacy for all Christians.

In the portrait by Van Dyke, which appears on your service sheet, the artist brings his own insight to that New Testament portrait. Peter's face, craggy and resolute, hardened by decades of physical work, nevertheless conveys authority; it is easy to see this man as the rock upon which Christ will build his Church. Peter's eyes are penetrating, their commanding power underlined by the keys he clutches; they are deep-set eyes that have beheld marvels, but also dreadful things. Notice that those eyes are rimmed with red, for Peter has wept at his own cowardice, at friendship denied. There is also frailty in this face, weariness at the journey travelled, a martyrdom already undergone, a martyrdom yet to endure.

Van Dyke captures the contradiction at the centre of Peter's relationship with Christ, a contradiction so marked that scholars have wondered whether the New Testament authors were actively seeking to discredit Peter. Peter, one of the first apostles to follow Christ, who speaks on their behalf and who is listed first among them, who professes his faith in Christ as the Messiah, who first witnesses the resurrection – is also an impulsive man who fails to understand the Messiah, who is rebuked and called Satan by Christ – and who denies and betrays him.

It is all there in the famous scene from Matthew's Gospel where Peter confesses "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God", for which Jesus names him the rock upon whom he will build his Church. Yet, moments later, when Peter questions Christ's prediction of his own passion, the rock becomes a 'stumbling block' – a *skandalon* in the original text – and the Lord rounds on Peter calling him "Satan". This incongruity runs like a fault-line through Peter's ministry. He is the "first apostle" – yet most spectacularly denies that he *is* one, denies even knowing the Lord. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is

a figure of authority who gives impressive testimony concerning Christ before the Jewish High Council, but Paul will confront him as an obstacle to the spread of the Gospel.

Is this truly an inconsistency in Peter? The faithful disciple who in reality has no faith? The one whose confession of the Messiah is not to be taken at face value? If so, this fatally undermines Peter's reputation. How can he be an example of discipleship, exercise any authority? How can his influence in any way continue in the Church, if his own witness is so utterly hypocritical? Let us not talk about a rock; let us talk of shifting sands.

But it is wrong to see Peter's failures as a denial of faith. He is *searching* for faith; he has not yet grasped how completely his faith must own him, or what its consequences will be. Peter denies Christ three times not because he disbelieves Christ, but because he is a coward. The Lord knows this and will later draw from Peter a threefold affirmation of his love; and will encourage him to strengthen his brethren. Later, as leader of the Jerusalem church, Peter, perhaps in a mistaken effort to avoid discord, seems to compromise the mission to the gentiles; yet he is known by the distant Galatians as an authority in Jerusalem. From the Acts we see him as a miracle worker, a missionary, a spokesman for the Christian community. Peter's faith is at times weak, yes, but that is very different from rejecting Christ. This is perhaps most clear when he tries to walk on the water towards Jesus: "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water". Peter impetuously and boldly reaches out to Christ, but founders when he realises what faith asks of him. His is a faith too easily daunted by external tribulations, a faith that will have to be tested and deepened. But it *is* faith.

Far from undermining the mission of the disciples, Peter encapsulates all their stories; he is their spokesman in terms of professing their faith, but he also epitomises their communal inability to grasp who Jesus really was and what his role as Messiah would really involve. Peter embodies the way that God takes frail, sinful creatures and makes them fishers of men; through, rather than in spite of, their weaknesses.

Peter *will* repent, and *will* strengthen his brothers. To him are given the keys of the kingdom - authority to bind and loose. But not the authority of a prison guard; it is as a pastor that the Lord so memorably invests him, asking him to feed his sheep, and tend his flock. Peter's authority is that of the shepherd, founded in his publicly confessed love for Jesus. He himself in his first letter describes the task of tending the flock of Christ not in terms of power, but rather as an example to those in his charge. Peter's role recalls that of the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. And indeed, Peter *will* do so, as part of his own witness.

That martyrdom, by a not insubstantial tradition, took place in Rome. You would not expect me, a Roman Catholic, to pass over Peter's role as the foundation of the papacy and its subsequent claims to authority over the Christian community. As if to encourage me, the choir has just sung Palestrina's *Tu es Petrus*, the Papal 'theme tune' that ushers the Pope in to all major events in Rome. Here I will make only two points. The first is that modern bishops of Rome do, or can, share that pastoral ministry of Peter in gathering, advising, and strengthening. Christians of other traditions, including Archbishops of

Canterbury, have noted the ability of the Pope to convene, to provide a forum for encounter, to strengthen his brethren. It may well be that the invitation of Pope John Paul, repeated afresh by Pope Francis, for other Christians to help discern how the Papacy may be of greater service to all Christians, will enhance this pastoral ministry of Peter.

The second point is one that we Roman Catholics especially must remember. Of all the apostles, it was Peter alone who came closest to Judas in his betrayal. Always at the centre of the Church is the possibility, the danger, of betraying Christ. The Popes, then, must share with Peter the awareness of their own need to be strengthened in the faith of Christ, to repent, to refer back to the person and admonishment of Christ. In doing so, then indeed, the figure of Peter, the model of discipleship in all its aspects, will truly be a rock upon which Christ's Church will stand firm.