

The Fourth Easter Reflection and Music for week of 17 May 2020: The restoration and commission of Saint Peter

Reflection by the Chaplain

Last week I commented on the tragic tale depicted in Rembrandt's painting 'Judas Repentant Returning Pieces of Silver' (1629) and today we consider the gospel narrative that inspired Rembrandt's 'The Denial of St Peter' (1660).¹ As previously stated, these narratives invite comparison for both Judas and Peter fail Christ in the final days of his life. Whilst Judas' remorse leads him to death and despair, Peter experiences God's grace as the risen Christ reaches out to him with love and forgiveness. The story of Peter is a story of amazing grace: it embodies the hope, mercy and love that comes through the risen Christ which is spoken of in the text of our anthem by SS Wesley.

Rembrandt's painting , 'The Denial of St Peter' captures the drama in the gospel accounts in a remarkable way. Jesus has been arrested and now stands before Caiaphas the High Priest.²



¹ The painting is held by the Rijksmuseum. See <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-3137>

² The story is in all four gospels: Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22 and John 18

Unlike the other disciples who had already forsaken Jesus, Peter follows Christ into the High Priestly courtyard.³ Yet fear got the better of Peter for as he sits by the fire warming himself, a servant girl recognises him as one who had been with Jesus. Rembrandt picks up on a detail mentioned in Luke's Gospel in his painting: the moment of recognition occurs as the light held by the servant girl shines onto Peter's face and illumines his robes. It is a high risk situation for two soldiers also listen in to their conversation and, in the top right corner of the painting, stands the figure of Christ surrounded by the High Priestly entourage and another soldier. The scene is set. Fear strikes and Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. The cock crows. Jesus casts a look in Peter's direction reminding Peter that he has just denied knowing him, not once but three times.⁴ Peter goes out, weeping bitterly. Jesus' prophesy had been fulfilled.⁵

Like Judas, Peter failed Christ. Yet, the risen Christ seeks Peter out, appearing to him before he appears to the remaining ten disciples.⁶ Over a week later, Jesus seeks Peter out again. On this occasion Jesus gets the Barbeque going on a Galilean beach from which Peter and his team are fishing. John records that when Peter recognises Jesus from the boat, his excitement is such that he jumps into the sea and wades to shore. He finds Jesus ready with a fire on which to cook fish for breakfast. There is no post-mortem on what Peter said and why, rather an ordinary demonstration of love and care in the form of a shared meal. It is only after they have finished eating that Jesus asks Peter 'Do you love me?'. The question is put three times.⁷ Peter's replies become ever more emphatic, 'Lord you know everything:

³ Peter had followed at a distance and entered into the courtyard of the High Priest to 'see the end' (Matthew 26:58).

⁴ Only Luke records that Jesus looked at Peter. Luke 22:61.

⁵ Luke 23:61

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:5.

⁷ Most scholars are now of the opinion that the different Greek words used for love here (*phileo/agapao*) do not convey any significant difference in meaning.

you know that I love you'.⁸ And as Peter articulates his love for Christ, so Jesus issues Peter with three pastoral charges: Peter, feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my lambs. Peter's three denials have been exchanged for a three-fold pastoral commission. Thus Peter, a flawed and inadequate disciple, is commissioned by Jesus to share the love of Christ and the Easter message of grace and hope.

This story of grace is very countercultural. We expect to get what we deserve and find it hard to believe that we can receive anything of value without earning it in some way: we believe the mantra 'you get what you pay for'. Yet Easter tells another story for the grace that is offered through the death and resurrection of Christ is held out, free of charge, to all who turn to Christ in repentance and sorrow. Unlike Judas, Peter did not give into despair, rather he opened his heart to the transforming love of God.

Prayer

May the God of hope fill us with joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit; through Him who died for us and rose again, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Comments on the anthem by Professor Edward Higginbottom

In Week 4 the Choir presents the middle section of Wesley's great Eastertide anthem *Blessed be the God and Father*, joined to the first section published last week. In Week 5 the whole piece will come together.

In this middle section, following verse anthem practice, much is made of a solo voice. In marked contrast to the out-going recitative for tenors and basses, a soprano takes over v.15

⁸ John 21:17.

of Peter's epistle: 'But as he which hath called you is holy'. At this point, Wesley adopts an arioso style (still hinting at recitative) before opening up into a most affecting cantilena ('Love one another with a pure heart fervently'). Here, full sopranos reprise the soloist's phrases. In both spirit and technique we are not far from the German Romantic Lied. Wesley's reliance on the upper voices may well reflect the difficult circumstances prevailing in Hereford Cathedral at the time. In 1834, when the anthem was first performed (on Easter Day), it is reported that, of the lower voices, only a single bass was present, and he the Dean's butler.

The Dean's butler, or whoever it was, entered again at v.23, 'Being born again'. This is another recitative, such as was heard earlier in the anthem. The short episode is notable for a dramatic transformation at 'For all flesh is as grass'. Wesley clearly knew how to heighten his text. And to leave us all hanging in the air, on a *subito fortissimo* dominant seventh. But more of that next week.

Text

First Epistle of Peter, chapter 1

15. But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.
17. Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.
22. See that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.
23. Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God.
24. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away.