



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

April 18, 2021
The Third Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
3pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F Turner, *Rector*
on
John 21:15-25
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The tears of Peter's memories.

We live in a time when we are constantly reminded of who we are not and who we might become. It is as if we are encouraged to doubt our self-image. Have you ever watched those make-over shows on the TV? I remember a few years ago getting hooked on one titled *'What not to wear'* (I sometimes wonder, now, what those presenters would make of the contents of our own sacristy cupboards!) Anyway, on one particular episode, they had two rather large ladies who had such poor self-esteem because of what they perceived to be their body image that they could not even bring themselves to look in a mirror. During the programme, they were given new clothes, new shoes, new hairstyles, new makeup but, of course, their actual bodies never changed. Instead, and probably more importantly, the presenters got to know them and built a relationship with them. At the end of the programme, the presenters uncovered a mirror to let the candidates see themselves. I must admit that I was completely floored by the reaction of one of the women. *"What do you think; what do you see?"* said the presenter. *"Me,"* she said, *"I see me!"*

What did Jesus see when he looked at Peter? The numerous stories we have of Peter in the Gospels and Acts allow us to get to know the real Peter – honest, down-to-earth, impetuous, at times foolish but very, very frail. When Jesus first met Peter on the lake when he was struggling to catch anything and the intervention of Jesus brought such a catch that the nets began to tear and the boats began to sink, Peter begged Jesus to leave him because he felt he was a sinner. But Jesus loved Peter because he knew that if Peter could only have the confidence to love the things that made him who he really was and not try to be someone else, then he would be able to do great things. However, it took time for Peter to realise this and Peter had to reach the depths of despair before he could be transformed.

I am always moved by that poignant passage towards the end of Luke's Gospel when, after the arrest of Jesus, Peter stands in the courtyard of the High Priest warming himself by the fire. After twice denying him, a third passer-by accuses him and Peter denies 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 22:60b-62)

Was that a turning point for Peter? From the depths of his despair came the realisation that he was all so human and so fragile. Were his tears the beginning of his redemption?

The late Cardinal Basil Hume once said, *“As he hung on the Cross a new alliance was made between God and man. The Bridge-Builder was indeed bridging the gulf which separates man from God. He was making retribution for the enormity of the insult which sin is. He was; as Priest, offering himself as Victim in a new sacrifice which would seal in his blood the new Covenant with God. A new people of God was born. Peter wept and was saved. Judas? ... Poor Judas”*¹.

What thoughts went through Jesus’ mind as he looked at Peter in the courtyard by the charcoal fire? Judas had betrayed him; Peter had denied him but could his tears also be his salvation?

As we sing in that famous hymn:

*“In your deep floods
drown all my faults and fears;
nor let his eye
see sin, but through my tears.”*²

Only a few days later, by another charcoal fire, Jesus would look intently at Peter again and ask his friend, *“Do you love me?”* Peter, perhaps troubled by his three-fold denial, would also see the marks of the nails and the spear – the wounds of love still fresh. Peter would see how fragile Jesus had made himself and, perhaps, he began at last to understand the emptying of God into his creation; finding the glory of God in the eternal freshness of the wounds of love. Peter could only discover the real Jesus after he had discovered his truest self. He had denied Jesus three times. Now he had to affirm Jesus three times – three acts of love that would cancel out three acts of cowardice. It is almost like a ritual; in fact, it is significantly like the beginning of the baptism liturgy – three renunciations and three turnings to Christ.³ Significantly, there is a school of thought that says the first letter that bears Peter’s name is, itself, an early baptismal liturgy. However, once Jesus had reconciled Peter to him, Jesus gave him a chilling prophecy about the true cost of discipleship: *“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But 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.”* (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God).’

Tradition says that Peter was crucified himself.

After Jesus had said “Follow me” we see a lingering reminder of how Peter had to work really hard to let go of trying to be someone else and to be true to himself, for when he saw the Beloved Disciple, he asked the Lord *“What about him?”* Jesus focussed the attention of Peter on to what mattered: *“If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”*

The late spiritual giant, Henry Nouwen, spent nine months in a Trappist Monastery searching for something; searching for a deeper understanding of what he was and what he could become. His spiritual director gave him some important words; he said, *“The question is not so much ‘How to live for the glory of God?’ but ‘How to live who we are, how to make true our deepest self?’”*⁴.

How to make true our deepest self.

or, as his Spiritual director went on to say,

“If the glory of God is not there where I am, where else can it be?”

St Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians: *“But 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)

Commenting on Christian Unity, Archbishop Welby said to Pope Francis, *“I marvel at the way God guides frail human vessels to be bearers of the message of salvation, leaving us a legacy across hundreds of years, to which we in our time are called to be faithful.”*⁵.

This clay that is the stuff of our human nature – once taken by God and formed into his likeness -can once again be signs of his glory through our relationship with Jesus Christ who transfigures and transforms. That discovery transformed Peter so much that eventually people even laid the sick in the street in the hope that Peter’s *shadow* might touch them.

Some words of Michael Ramsey: *“From Calvary and Easter there comes a Christian hope of immense range: the hope of transformation not only of humankind but of the cosmos too...The bringing of humankind to glory will be the prelude to the beginning of all creation. Is this hope mere fantasy? At its root there is the belief in the divine sovereignty of sacrificial love, sovereignty made credible only by transfigured lives.”*⁵.

Let us pray.

**Lord, overshadow us with your grace;
take away our desire for control;
help us to love who we are
and not waste time on becoming someone else;
may we be like Peter
and find transformation
through the tears of our memories. Amen.**

¹. ‘Searching for God’ Chapter 6, n.8

². From the hymn ‘Drop, drop slow tears’ by Phineas Fletcher

³. Question Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

Answer I do.

Question Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Answer I do.

Question Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

Answer I do.

4. "The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery"

5. Meeting of Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin, June 16, 2014

6. 'Be still and Know' pp 69-70