

“Leap of Faith”

I love St. Peter. Without his example I do not think that I could have any hope of salvation. Growing up we were always instructed to emulate Jesus. Jesus was our example for how to be. That is all well and good. We should have exemplars to aspire to. The only problem with aspiring to be like Jesus is that we are bound to fail. I was taught that Jesus was perfect—the one and only Son of God. If he is perfect and the only one who is, what hope have I, or any of us, to live up to that? The answer in short is none.

In contrast, Peter gives me the example of a faithful disciple or student of Jesus. There is absolutely no doubt that Peter believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He is the first to exclaim that Jesus is the Christ. He, along with James and John, is part of Jesus’ inner circle. He is present for the Transfiguration (a holy day traditionally observed just this past Thursday). The same group was also close to Jesus as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Throughout the Gospels he is always listed first among the disciples, attesting to his importance and prominence among Jesus’ followers.

Let’s not forget today’s Gospel reading. Peter, despite his failure, is the one who tries. All of the twelve are in the boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. As they get out onto the sea the disciples have the wind against them. They are rowing hard, but several are experienced fisherman, they are not worried. That is, they are not, until they see Jesus walking towards them on the water. That scares them a lot for they think they have seen a ghost. Perhaps it is then that they think they might be in peril.

Jesus calls out to them that it is just him. Peter challenges the presumed ghost to call out to him to walk on the water toward him. That is either foolish or gutsy. Perhaps it is a ghost who will call Peter to his death. Even if it is Jesus, what makes Peter think that he too can walk on water? Regardless, Jesus does call “Come” and Peter steps out of the boat, something no other disciple did. To his surprise he is actually walking on the water, but then he feels the tempest and starts to doubt. His faith, which was strong enough to get him out of the boat, is not strong enough to sustain him, and he begins to sink.

Jesus rescues him and brings them both into the boat at which time the seas calm. Matthew then tells us that the disciples worship him. What about Peter? For a moment there he walked on water. While Jesus chides him for having “little faith,” Peter had enough faith to take the first steps. That is more than the others did, and more than you or I would probably do. Peter trusted Jesus enough to believe he could walk toward him upon the water. It was his rational mind that got the better of him.

Peter has his faults and failings. He is impetuous, a little too eager. He can be a little thick. He put the duh in “duh-sciple.” He is not the most eloquent speaker, which is an important quality of an apostle and evangelist. He turns coward at a critical time, and denies even knowing who Jesus is, much less that he is a follower.

Yet this is the same disciple whom Jesus appoints to have the keys to the kingdom. He is the one that Jesus calls the Rock on which the church will be built. If Peter is a rock, then I have hope. Indeed, we all have hope. For if we set our sights on Peter as our example of discipleship we have a chance of making it.

The first line of today's Psalm may be Peter's mantra. "I will listen to what the LORD God is saying." He listens and he tries. He does not always get it right, but he listens and obeys. He got scared and started to fail, but he tried. He followed Jesus to the mountaintop and saw him transfigured. He tried to memorialize the event by building booths. It was not the right response, but he tried. He followed Jesus after he was arrested. He did not know what to do and he ending up denying Jesus. When he realized his failing he was bereft.

Peter is not the perfect disciple. None of the first disciples were. The great saints over the last two thousand years had failings, also. The one thing they have in common is that they listen to God and try their best.

One of the greatest Christian teachers of the 20th century and perhaps all time is Thomas Merton. He wrote in his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*, a remarkable prayer that speaks to human frailty and human longing.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."¹

If St. Peter had been so eloquent he would have prayed these words. These are the words of a disciple like Peter. These are the words of a flawed, frail, and faith filled human being. One who has seen Jesus and loved him and knows no other path than to follow him the best he or she can. The disciple knows full well that he or she will fail and falter. This disciple trusts that God knows he or she desire is to please God. This disciple also knows that no matter how dark the times God will never leave this faith filled servant to face the perils and dangers of this life alone.

This is God's promise to you and me just as it was to Peter on that day when he stepped out of the boat making the great leap of faith. A leap of faith that inspires each of us to do the same when Jesus beckons to us, "Come. Come to me. Come."

¹ Thomas Merton. *Thoughts in Solitude*. [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999]