

AN INITIAL ENTHUSIASM

I want, insofar as I am able, to give you the five major turning points in the life of the Apostle Peter. Simon Peter is not a great thinker or a great theologian like Paul. He is not a great organizer like James (the brother). He is not wealthy like Levi, or a revolutionary like the other Simon, called the Zealot. Some of his best contributions are the result of his bungling. Despite the Roman Catholic insistence that Peter was the first Pope, in his lifetime Peter seems to consistently duck every official position of leadership. He blusters, puts his foot in his mouth, guesses wrong, and makes bad choices over and over. Yet he keeps learning, people love him, and, next to Jesus, he seems to be the greatest healer of the time (Paul is close). Nevertheless, while others are starting new churches, organizing feeding programs, holding great Councils, and carrying forth the work of the Kingdom, Peter just seems to “wander about” – encouraging, preaching, healing, visiting – without specific aim or title or purpose. Yet his influence and impact are enormous.

While it is probable that most of the disciples were married, we know for sure that Peter was married. The first hint is in the very first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law. (Mark 1:30; Matthew 9:5; Luke 4:38) It is a known fact that it is very difficult to heal someone’s mother-in-law if they are not married. It is difficult enough even if they *are* married. It delights me to know that being married is no excuse for failing to follow Jesus. I hope it delights you too. It also delights me to know that the first Pope was married; celibacy was a mistake we added later in the game. I have always been sad that Peter’s wife did not write an account of how this whole business looked from her perspective. But we do not know her name. We do not know if she was home taking care of the children when Peter first joined Jesus’ Movement. We only know that she traveled with Peter in his later missionary journeys. (I Corinthians 9:5)

In any case, many of us can identify more easily with Peter than with any of the other major players in the early church, at least at first. More importantly, Peter goes through major phases – major turning points – in his spiritual awakening and development that are classic for all of us. It is fun to track him and see if that helps us to track ourselves. Moreover, Peter’s story makes it abundantly clear that conversion is not a one-time, one-dimensional experience. No matter how dramatic our first awakening, it is never the end – it is only the beginning of our pilgrimage. We keep getting converted, layer after

layer. Once is never enough! If it is only once, that means we went back to sleep, fell off the Path, stopped following the WAY. I think most of *you* know this, but large segments of current-day Christendom do not seem to know this. At least they do not talk or act as if they know it. That makes it doubly important for us to know and remember it.

Peter's story is not told to us by or for itself. It comes to us in bits and pieces along the track of a much larger story. Fragments and anecdotes from his many years of ministry drift back to us from beyond and around the New Testament. From the New Testament itself, we get incidents and comments, mostly in passing. The focus is on Jesus, and Peter hangs around with Jesus. So the bits and pieces mount up until some of Peter's story also unfolds. We discover that there is something very familiar about Peter. He could almost be somebody we know. He could even be us. Peter is kind of a prototype in that way – a kind of model for at least a large segment of those of us who try to follow Jesus.

Sorry for this technical aside, but several names are used for Peter in the Bible: Simon, Symeon (Simeon), Cephas, and Peter. *Simon* is Greek for the Hebrew *Simeon* – as in Jacob's second son and one of the twelve tribes of Israel. That is Peter's real name: Simon son of Jonas (Jonah or, in Greek, John). But there are two Simons among the twelve disciples. Obviously one must be given a different name, so Jesus nicknames Simon *Cephas* (Aramaic, *kephas*), which means "stone." The Greek equivalent is *petros* – rock. Hence, Peter. Especially when Peter is referred to as Cephas, some modern readers miss the connection.

Peter's brother is Andrew, and they both come from Bethsaida, which means "house of fishing." Bethsaida is a suburb or village of Capernaum, and Capernaum is Jesus' headquarters during His ministry on earth.

The first major phase of Peter's spiritual awakening reveals a remarkable and essential change in his life. It is the only part of the story we will look at today. We could call it Peter's first conversion. If conversion means "to change," Peter certainly qualifies. We could title this first phase: FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. It is a period in which Peter's lifestyle, his direction, his goals, and his beliefs are all dramatically changed. As we just mentioned, he is even given a new name to go along with his very different life: Rock. The overall mood of this first period is an initial enthusiasm.

Let's take a quick look at Peter's first conversion. It has five ingredients, and they are classic. You can find the same five ingredients in the story of Moses or Paul or Jeremiah or any of the great prototypes. Peter ends up being among them.

FIRST, Peter listened to the Word. He heard Jesus preaching. He did not just hear Jesus – he *heard* Jesus. That is, some of it was getting through. (Interesting that *Simon* means “hearing” in Hebrew.) We do not know much about Peter up to this point. He was a Jew and a Galilean fisherman, and he had a family to support. But conversions do not come out of nowhere. Peter seems to be part of a group of Galilean fishermen (including his brother Andrew and his friend Philip) who were followers of John the Baptist. (John 1:40ff) So was Jesus, prior to His own conversion. Then Jesus was baptized and came into much greater awareness of His true identity and purpose. At the instigation of John the Baptist, word began to spread among his followers that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

The point is that Peter was already sincerely “religious,” in his way. It seems clear that he and Andrew (and probably James and John and Philip) had been baptized by John the Baptist. He knew Jesus, though probably not much *about* Him yet. There is always preparation and inclination and history prior to conversion. God chooses the willing. God does not straight-arm the unwilling. Contact with God changes us, to be sure. But however much we may protest or claim total surprise, in some ways we were asking for it. Are *you* asking for it? For further contact with God? Most people are not – not really – and then they wonder why God leaves them pretty much alone.

In my own mind, I try to picture what Peter was like. I picture him in his own day and time, yet he also reminds me of some of the people I know today: hard-working, with a big heart, and usually good-humored. I am sure he had a temper too; we see it from time to time. I suspect that he was well-liked. I imagine that he was a bit scornful of the larger religious establishment (since he was involved with the reformer, John the Baptist), but he was probably also a member of the synagogue in Capernaum. I imagine him telling jokes, arguing about politics, having a lot of strong opinions about Romans, taxes, and corruption in high places. I see him as a person who loved children and who did not mind going out of his way to help a neighbor. Then one day, Jesus borrowed his boat for a while so Jesus could get offshore just far enough to talk to the people about the Kingdom of God.

The impression we get is that Peter heard a lot of religious truth that day which he already believed. Only, he heard it put together with authority and power and challenge like he had never heard it before. Things he had sort of believed and sort of tried to practice suddenly turned into a full-blown invitation and summons. Jesus talked about a Kingdom that was unseen but more real than what was seen – a thing God was doing that would literally change the world and the very nature of reality. What Peter had been trying to make a part of his life was now asking to be his *whole* life – and he was getting a glimpse of how living for this Kingdom was LIFE itself, and the only life worth living.

Is that not what happens when people *hear* the Word? It is what we have always believed, at least vaguely, and then one day it jumps into focus – moves from tenth place into first place – and displaces a lot of things in the process. Very simple, in a way. And totally profound. What we had merely tried to include in our lives as something nice or ethical or helpful suddenly takes us over and we feel the presence of God in and around us, when before it had seemed more like theory, or maybe just humanity’s better side trying to come to the fore. In any case, Peter heard the Word.

SECOND, Peter had an experience of the power and benevolence of God toward him personally. Conversion is never theory alone – never just intellect. Conversion is always encounter – personal experience. Naturally, that has to come in some form – some “language” – we can understand. Peter was a fisherman. How do you think the Spirit would deal with that? Peter had fished all night with no luck. Suddenly, at Jesus’ word, his boat was overflowing with fish. That got his attention. He knew fish and fishing, and this was not normal. It happened to him and for him, and there was no mistaking the presence of an unseen power.

You probably do not want me to remind you of this, but generally speaking, the flashy miracles that come for our personal benefit happen early in our Christian pilgrimage. They are *not* the point or purpose of the Kingdom. They reveal God’s presence and power and personal affection. After that is made clear, God moves on to more important matters. The miracles get deeper and more to the point, but they do not entertain as much, unless you are talking to other pilgrims.

In this case, Peter had probably dreamed his whole life of making such a catch. Now that it had happened, before the day was over he would walk away from it all. The power behind such a catch was bigger

than the catch itself. “That for which a thing is such, the thing itself is more such.”

THIRD, Peter is undone. Logically, Peter would be begging Jesus to come fish with him every day from now on. “Hey, let’s go into business together. We could both get rich.” But this is too big for logic. Peter begs Jesus to leave. The reaction is strange, but classic. Peter is awestruck and astonished. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” Peter cannot believe this has happened to him. As the significance strikes home, he is filled with the sudden, full realization of his own unworthiness. There is no way to live up to a personal visit and gift from the Lord of Creation. The honor is too high. It cannot be handled – it cannot be “lived up to.” We all want God – until we discover that God is real and present. Then it is suddenly too much for us. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” (Get me out of here!) Strange, isn’t it? We complain because God does not reveal himself more often and more clearly – yet from God’s side, we turn off or go “tilt” at every slight glimpse God tries to give us.

FOURTH, Peter is reassured and commissioned. Peter’s unworthiness and sinfulness are not disputed. No debate there; it is obviously true. Only, that is not the point or the issue. Peter has heard the Word, and he has experienced a taste of the Word. God cares about him. He is invited in. “Do not be afraid – come work for *me*.” That is crucial. Without the invitation to share in the task, the experience would have been a fake. The world is full of counterfeit conversions. Every authentic first conversion comes with an assignment. If it comes without an assignment, then the experience is either self-induced or emotionally induced by others.

The FIFTH step is the acceptance of the invitation and moving into the assignment. God always leaves the final decision to us. Sometimes, as with the rich young ruler, we turn it down. In Peter’s case (and in Andrew’s and James’ and John’s), the response is clear and definite – not at first, but finally: “*They left everything and followed him.*”

Perhaps we need to mention that “leaving everything to follow Him” is not essentially a physical phenomenon. The assignment is not always to a different place, nor is it always to a different function. But we are *always* called to do things with a different motive and purpose, and with a new understanding of how it fits into the Kingdom’s goals. Whether or not the “outside” looks different, the “inside” is always a whole new world.

I invite you to take a fresh look at Peter. Get to know him, read up on him, look beneath the surface, compare your own Christian pilgrimage with his. And when you see the pattern clearly on the individual level, do not stop there. See if the pattern fits also when you apply it to your family, your friendships, your business, your church. If the pattern is right, it will hold true on any and every level. At least it's clear that Jesus called Peter to become a disciple – one of the twelve. Peter did *not* volunteer. It was not Peter's idea. Nor is any of it put on a tentative, trial basis.

So what are we really hearing and seeing? Does this familiar story renew our awareness of any major, classic, profound principles of the Christian WAY? Being “called” is huge in our tradition. At His baptism, Jesus is called to be God's Messiah. As things begin to unfold, Jesus knows this gives Him the authority and power to call others. In today's passage, we are watching Jesus call Peter – and Andrew and James and John, and soon the rest of the twelve. And clearly *they* will be asked to call still others into the Christian Life. This is the beginning of Jesus' mission and what would become the church: the *ecclesia*. It begs us each to re-ask ourselves about our own calling. Is it still fresh and dynamic in the way we are each living our life? And are we each still calling others into this New Life?

This principle of calling is also the beginning of anger, dissent, and opposition – which is not often noticed. It will eventually lead to a Cross. Beyond that, all but one of the twelve will be killed as well. Being called is huge in our tradition. We do not call ourselves. “*You did not choose me – I chose you.*” Following Jesus – walking in the WAY – is never our idea. We are *called* into it. It is the essence and core of BAPTISM. We are called from our old life into a New Life. We are called through death into LIFE. And this calling always invites us into the part we are asked to play – a task to accomplish. From now on, Peter will be fishing for men.

By the way, I hope you have noticed that Paul ends up transforming the concept of circumcision in the Old Covenant into the concept of baptism (being called) in the New Covenant. He makes this especially clear in his letter to the Colossians, and it becomes an integral part of his thinking. The true circumcision is not something external. (Romans 2:28-29) The true circumcision is made without hands. (Colossians 2:11) We are the true circumcision. (Philippians 3:3) That is, Paul believed that the true circumcision of Christ is far deeper and more meaningful than any physical mark that can be made on the

outside – on the flesh. Paul had experienced both, and he recommended both. But by the middle of his ministry, Paul had shifted entirely to baptism, to watching and listening for our calling – the New Life: the new identity, and the call that comes with it.

Sadly but predictably, we ended up limiting this calling, at least in most places, to something that happens only to clergypersons – only to people whose jobs will be in and for and paid for by the institutional church. In other words, to people whose patterns do not match with Jesus or Paul or Peter or the rest of the early disciples. Isn't that cute? However, in the early church, it was the widespread conviction and assumption that *all* Christians are called by the Holy Spirit and that each one is given a part to play. *"I implore you then – I, a prisoner for the Lord's sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling."* (Ephesians 4:1) Paul is clearly talking to *all* the Christians. He assumes and believes that all of them are aware that God has called them. Moreover, Ephesians is not a letter written to one church; it is a circular letter written to all the churches in Asia Minor. And Paul is reminding everyone that if all the Christians would live up to their calling – in Paul's day or in ours – what a mouthwatering prospect that would be.

In any case, Peter moves into his New Life with the characteristic enthusiasm of a new convert. He is delighted to be with Jesus, and he is hungry to learn and do everything he can for the Kingdom. He is enamored with Jesus' powers, and he participates joyfully in Jesus' preaching and teaching missions. He asks a lot of dumb questions, like: "Why don't you call down fire from Heaven on their heads?" Or, "How many times do I have to forgive somebody?" Or, "Can I come to you across the water?" (He was not nicknamed Rock for nothing.) Partly for this very reason, Peter seems to learn faster than the others. His faith grows, and so does his love and loyalty for Jesus.

At this point, Peter is a good illustration of the happy convert. Following Jesus is a lark, even though a very meaningful, deep, and significant lark. And if you had asked Peter at this point in his life, he would probably have said that the mark of a true convert is joy, enthusiasm, and optimism. He would tell you that life is full of miracles for true believers, that earthly success is God's will and pattern for the faithful, and that everything will work out fine if you just trust Jesus and truly believe.

And Peter would not be kidding because that is his experience thus far – he knows because it has happened to him. What he does *not* know is that there is still a great deal more to come. He is in Phase One – a true convert. He has moved FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. He is a different man – a new person – with a different lifestyle, a new identity, a great Message, and a dynamic new purpose for his life.

Does it seem to you that we have covered the full spectrum of conversion? If so, the coming sermons are especially for you. No doubt some of the initial enthusiasm and joy of this first conversion stayed with Peter for the rest of his life. But his story has barely begun. The Lord is not nearly finished with Peter, and a very great deal is going to depend upon him. May I suggest, quietly and simply and in a friendly way, that at this point, Peter is a rank neophyte. He is beautifully sincere and unmistakably dedicated, and without this first conversion, none of the rest of his story could have been possible. But Peter is still a baby in the Kingdom. His understanding is shallow, and his expectations are mostly earthbound and almost entirely wrong. Despite his willing acceptance of his task as a follower of Christ, he is still completely oblivious to the real role he will be asked to play. It will be far larger, far harder, and far more important than anything Peter has even begun to imagine.

To be sure, Jesus is very pleased with Peter, and He is content to work with him, teach him, love him, nurture him, and be patient with him while he grows up in the Spirit. But today we see Peter in Phase One – the first conversion – FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE.

And so I suggest, quietly and simply and in a friendly way, that we cannot be content to let our own stories stop at Phase One.