

Pictures of the Apostle Peter

THE APOSTLE PETER seems to be the Gospel's whipping boy, the disciple (excluding Judas) who gets all the bad press. As a New Testament "personality," he may be more vividly realized than St. Paul, despite the latter's many self-defining epistles.

John's account of Peter's calling explains that his brother Andrew sought him out with the words "We have found the Messiah," and he brought him to Christ who gave him the surname *Cephas*, which is Syriac for stone, *Petros* being the Greek equivalent. Matthew's account of the calling (4:19) is different. He reports that the two brothers were fishing and Jesus but called them to "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men," whereupon "they straightway left their nets and followed him." No hesitation, no mulling over the consequences of changing their profession in an instant. Peter is acting spontaneously, without reservation, fully committed. Acting on impulse will create problems for him as well as serve to endear him to his Master for what we may describe as his transparent simplicity and emotional childlikeness.

Luke's account of Peter's calling (5:1ff.) highlights the fisherman's powerful piety. After his boat was used by Jesus to speak from offshore to the press of people, the Lord instructed him to let down his net for a draught. Peter responded that he had toiled all night and taken nothing. Why

attempt another cast? But he let down his net and enclosed a great multitude of fish, whereupon he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Here is Peter, always genuine, instantly aware of his lack of faith. As a future fisher of men, he may look back to this event and when the prospects for the harvest of souls may look bleak, he can remember that the Lord has instructed a draught and regardless of the Apostle's doubts, there await so many souls to be "caught" in Christ's net of forgiveness and salvation (153 or 9, the number of humanity), that his own means for securing them will prove inadequate.

After His difficult saying about eating His flesh and blood, causing many of His disciples to leave Him, Jesus asks the twelve, "Will ye also go away?" Simon Peter answers Him, "Lord, to



Tempera on paper, 1514-1515, Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio) 1483-1520. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Miraculous Draught of Fishes

One of a group of painted cartoons serving as the design for tapestry weavers in Flanders, the resulting tapestries destined for the Sistine Chapel, the above scene conflates the miraculous catch with the calling of Peter and his brother Andrew, as recounted in Mark and Matthew. James and John, probably with their father Zebedee, in the second boat, are becoming aware of the unfolding drama. Peter kneels in reverent recognition of Christ Jesus' power and Person.

whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the Living God” (John 6:68-69). John makes clear that his co-disciple *believed* that Jesus was the Messiah (Christ), which Hebrew tradition described as “the Son of the Living God.” It is true that, as he says, Peter believes, whereas the Evangelist, being closer to Christ, *knows* Jesus’ spiritual identity. Here at the outset we are introduced to the distinctly *human* nature of belief—that however earnest and emphatic in demonstration, it is not founded on the certitude of direct cognition or spiritual vision and is thus subject to variableness.

In an incident that may refer to the same exchange in Caesarea Philippi reported by John, Matthew relates that Jesus asks His disciples “Whom say ye that I am” (16:15ff.). Peter answers with the identical words given by John. Here Peter is more emphatic, as if he had direct vision of the Christ Being occupying the Jesus body. For flesh and blood cannot declare one’s real identity, but rather obscures it. While Christ Jesus states as a fact that Peter is blessed by the Father because it is He Who has given Peter this visionary gift, it is also clear that its possession has not been won by Peter’s own effort, for subsequently, on several occasions, he fails to recognize Christ Jesus (when He came toward them at night, walking on water, and when He appeared after the Resurrection by the Sea of Galilee). In fact, we might surmise that Peter yet retains a degree of the involuntary (negative) clairvoyance that was the natural endowment of early man but was gradually lost as the vital and dense physical bodies came into exact coincidence and as both instruments became condensed by self-centered emotions and sense-bound thinking.

Peter’s ardent, impetuous nature gives rise to one of the Gospel’s most memorable scenes (Matt. 14:22ff.). It is night. The disciples are in a boat tossed by rough water and buffeted by contrary winds. Jesus had been praying on land and now is walking on the water toward them. At first the disciples think they are seeing a ghost (“spirit”). Then they see it is the Lord. (We refrain here from considering this event as the account of an initiatory experience in the desire world.) Peter says, “Lord, *if it be thou*, bid me come unto thee on the water.”



Water color, 66 x 81 cm, 1990, Dennis Klocek. Courtesy of the artist

Walking On Water

The gospel incident narrating Peter’s attempt to walk on water is shown by the artist as an initiation experience. The disciples are in their boat at night on the lower level of the physical world while they appear above in the desire world in the vessel of their soul bodies. The Christ stands encouraging a sinking Peter. The Holy Spirit inspires from above.

Jesus bids him come and he begins to walk on the water. But he soon loses his initial buoyant confidence as he takes his mind off the reason for his venture, and he begins to sink, calling on the Lord to save him. Jesus says, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”

Practically speaking, a lapse of faith in one’s ability to walk on water is scarcely cause for condemnation. But Peter insists on being tested and is determined to demonstrate his faith. He can well represent those zealous and enthusiastic aspirants who want to forcefeed their spiritual progress and who desire spectacular results before fully establishing the wherewithal to realize them. The Rock upon which Christ Jesus will build his Church is

not Peter *per se* but the rock-firm faith in Christ Jesus that Peter potentially possesses.

Peter's inability to comprehend his beloved Master's mission is starkly apparent in his response to Jesus' foretelling of His necessary suffering and death. The disciple is troubled: "Lord, this shall not be unto thee." Were he to say "should," he would show his understanding of the distinction between what he personally desires and what is right or necessary. Jesus sternly rebukes his emotional friend with the striking words, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matt. 16:22-23).

Here we see Peter possessive of the outward person of Jesus, wanting to protect him from physical danger and abuse. Such a wonderfully human reaction is based on a sort of misguided mother love, and, finally, ignorance. It is of a kind with the loud lamentation of survivors upon the death of a loved one, which display, unbeknownst to the grievers, actually interferes with the departed's right progress.

The natural desire to save the physical life at all cost, which desire had occasioned Peter's outburst, is countered by Jesus' subsequent remark that not only He but His disciples also, if they would "come after" Him, will have to deny this instinctive impulse to prioritize the physical body and take up that instrument as a cross and follow Jesus. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."

After coming down from the mountain where Jesus has been transfigured before them, Peter shows another trait which has been bequeathed to the Catholic church that venerates him as its Founder—the desire to build a shrine to commemorate a "miracle," or the manifestation of the



Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893). Tate Gallery, London

Christ Washing St. Peter's Feet

A greatly reluctant and uncomfortable Peter submits to His Master's self-abasing act while the other disciples look on intently (Judas at left is unloosing his sandal). Christ Jesus is both demonstrating his gratitude for service and practicing the precept: "He who would be the greatest among you, let him be the servant of all."

superphysical in the material dimension. Matthew and John do not recount this incident but Luke (9:28ff.) and Mark (9:1ff.) do. Luke's comment about Peter's desire to build three tabernacles to honor Jesus, Moses, and Elias undercuts the disciple's mis-directed enthusiasm. Luke's almost parenthetical description of Peter's remark, which Jesus simply lets pass as an adult would a child's inept request, is "not knowing what he said." How often could the same be said of some hasty or ill-considered statement or proposal we have made? Peter is not one to weigh his words or to reflect before entering on a course of action. He jumps in at once, with no qualifications or demurrals. That is what part of us finds so appealing in Peter, and at times makes him appear foolish—as in "a fool for God."

Though Judas was keeper of the purse, on one occasion Peter is assigned the task of obtaining tribute money from the mouth of the first-caught fish (Matt. 12:24ff.). The anachronistic irony is that

what is here to be given to Caesar shall subsequently be given to the Piscean institution that descends from Peter, the Roman Catholic church, which shall confer spiritual favors and blessings on worldly powers that are tributaries to its great material wealth.

Only John records the Maundy Thursday footwashing (13:3ff). Christ Jesus has already washed the feet of some of the disciples. When He comes to Peter, the literal one asks “Lord, dost thou wash my feet?” He is aghast and embarrassed that one so high and holy should perform such a menial and personal act. His resistance to the lowly gesture is obvious and Jesus explains, “What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.” These words should suffice, should they not? Peter knows his Master knows what He is doing. But he does not relent: “Thou shalt never wash my feet.”

Thus speaks headstrong Peter. He has a sense of what is right, and subjecting the Messiah to this indignity is *not* right. But actually it is Peter who suffers the indignity. When Jesus answers, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me,” Simon just as vehemently turns heels, reverses his position and exclaims, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.” First one extreme. Then the other. Here is this unpremeditated, earnest soul, quick to speak and act, and as quick to repent his actions and words if he be shown their error. The man is strong up front. He is learning to get strong down deep, wisely strong.

Peter correlates with Pisces, at the outset unstable as water. He is the ‘wave’ man who becomes the Rock of Initiation after he awakens the Christ principle within himself.

Peter knows that the one “whom Jesus loves,” who is literally closer to His heart at the Last Supper, might be better able to read his Master’s thoughts, for He has just said that one of the assembled twelve will betray Him. Peter, never subtle or incurious, asks John to inquire of the Lord whom He means. Why does not Peter ask his question directly? Might he be obscurely intuiting



Duccio di Buoninsegna (1260-1320), from the *Maestà* (46 panels). Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena

Betrayal

Even as Judas delivers the “kiss of death,” thereby identifying the one to be seized by the high priest’s guards, the disciples begin to desert their master. Only Peter rallies to Jesus’ aid, smiting Malchus and cutting off his ear.

his own inadequacy, his own sinful nature, his unpredictability, his reversibility (demonstrated only hours later)? This would speak well of him for humility, but poorly of him for not knowing his own mind.

On the Mount of Olives, while Jesus is praying and, as it were, sweating blood, Peter, James, and John have fallen asleep. Jesus is disappointed: “What, could ye not watch with me one hour?” (Matt. 26:26-40). Peter’s inability to remain in consciousness at the high level where Jesus is wrestling with dark forces, to watch *with* Him, was common to his fellow disciples, in spite of their good will and intention to do otherwise. Committing all one’s available resources to an endeavor does not insure that one will immediately succeed. But *not* persisting will assure failure.

Even when Caiaphas’ guards seize Jesus in Gethsemane and Peter instantly rallies to Jesus’ aid by brandishing his sword and cutting off Malchus’ ear, his brave response is judged by Christ Jesus to be irresponsible and ill-advised because it does not accord with the principle of pacifism in His teachings—as expressed in “turning the cheek” and “Blessed are the peacemakers.” It is also subject to the spiritual law that “they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” More to the point, Jesus has already informed his disciples of what must take place and that Scripture is to be fulfilled. But Peter finds it hard to accept this prospect, even

though it be his Master's will. He has perceived that Christ Jesus is the Son of God, but at this moment His power seems to be in question. Peter wants to protect Him Who, should He pray to His Father, would be attended by "more than twelve legions of angels."

What can we learn here? That, like Peter, we will toe the line and do our duty and pledge our allegiance—unless something *really* unjust or offensive to our nature crops up? Doesn't a part of us embrace Peter's defensive action, find it even admirable? But Jesus' business is not the way the world does business and if we vow *not* to be conformed to the world, then we must be obedient to all that vow entails. Humility and consistency will surely help us in our resolve.

The most poignant instance of Peter's saying one thing and doing another, of passionate affirmation that fails to be confirmed in action, is in his thrice denying knowing Jesus so he can "save his own skin." Not only has he said, "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended," but more grandly, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee" (Matt. 26:33-35). As Mark reports it (14:29), Peter's oath of fealty is tinged with bravado: "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." But what does he in fact *do*? Through John's intercession (John 18:15ff), the doors to the high priest's palace are opened to him. Peter enters and is three times recognized as one of Jesus' followers. He feigns ignorance and his denials (Matt. 26:70-74), like the man himself, are strong: 1) "I know not what thou sayest." 2) "I do not know the man." 3) "Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man."

Luke's account of this event shows the Lord's prescience. He tells Peter that Satan desires to sift him as wheat (22:31ff), but He has prayed for His disciple that his faith fail not. But He knows Peter is yet wavering because He then says, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Peter



Oil on canvas, 122 x 159 cm. Guercino (Giovanni Grancesco Barbieri), 1591-1666. Louvre, Paris

The Tears of St. Peter

As the Mother of the Man of Sorrows mourns His violent death, Peter's grief is compounded by remorse for thrice denying that he knows his Lord and Master.

answers, "Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death," but not, we see, *until* he is converted, and it takes the dramatic denial of the Lord to convert him.

Is Peter to be singled out as more fickle and insincere than his fellows? The text says that all the disciples pledged their solidarity with Jesus at the Last Supper. Following upon his affirmation of loyalty, "Likewise also said *all* the disciples." But Peter seems to be the most vocal, the most emphatic, the most absolute, the most, shall we say, lacking in humility.

When we read of this incident, we are troubled. We ask, Peter, how could you? But would we have done otherwise, when the chips were down, to save our own neck? For no mistaking, the high priest and his henchmen meant business. Still, how great the fall from the impassioned oath of to-the-death loyalty to low oaths of anger and rejection. And Peter knows it. He is heartbroken. After he hears the second crowing of the cock he remembers Jesus' words and is shocked by shame and engulfed in misery. He goes out and weeps bitterly.

When Mary reports to the assembled disciples that she has seen the Risen Christ and that His sepulcher is empty, Peter and John race to the tomb, John outstripping his elder companion (John 20).

But at the tomb's entrance Peter enters immediately (as in "fools rush in"?) while John holds back, entering later. What is happening here? Is John giving another instance of Peter's impetuosity, his leaping before looking, his being possessed by undisciplined fervor. Just as likely is John graciously implying that Peter, being Peter, is consumed by love and hope that brook no hesitation or forethought. He is fully in character.

John's account of the Easter Monday fishing is actually an elaboration of the calling of Peter as recorded by Luke. Here, having fished all night and caught nothing, day breaks and the resurrected Jesus inquires from the shore if the disciples have any meat. He instructs them to cast their nets on the right of the vessel. They do and their net is burdened with fish. It is John who then recognizes the Lord. But it is, characteristically, Peter who, upon hearing the word (he didn't see the Word), casts himself into the sea. John is already with the Lord in spirit. Peter needs to be with Him bodily. This time he does not sink. He can swim, or wade.

When they have finished dining Jesus asks Peter three times, "Simon, lovest thou me." Peter is "grieved" to have to assure his Master three times of his love. And he must also wince as he painfully recalls his thrice denying the One for Whom he now professes love ("more than these" other disciples), the same One Whom he vowed to follow into prison and unto death. And even here, something of the old Peter, can we say, the jealous Peter, who wants to be first, who wants all of His Lord's love, asserts itself. For he is told in unmistakable terms that his vow will be fulfilled: when he is old he will stretch forth his hands and be bound and carried where he "wouldst not." To which Peter responds, even as might an adolescent, "What shall this man [John] do?" Okay, I'm going to die under compulsion, but what about John? Will he have a better death? John's Gospel suggests that Peter may have been competing with the other disciples, especially John, for the Lord's attention and favor. Jesus answers Simon, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me."

With a few exceptions, this word portrait has not considered Peter in an esoteric sense as the personification of one of the twelve human faculties



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610). S. Maria del Popolo, Rome

The Crucifixion of St. Peter

"When thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee wither thou wouldest not....Follow me" (John 21:18,19). Peter, in a consummate act of humility, insists on an inverted crucifixion to indicate his unworthiness to imitate the death of his Lord.

or zodiacal energies. Nor has it attempted to study the Gospel narratives as accounts of initiatory experiences. We have intended simply to look at Peter's all-too-familiar humanness. We may even regard him as the New Testament's Everyman, the one most like those (us) who would follow Christ: at once most faithful and most fallible; saying one thing and then doing another; giving up all to follow Him and then dictating the terms or the limits of our obedience to him; or even, God forbid, denying we have ever known him. If such a one is chosen to feed the Lord's sheep, surely we each have the same commission and the same hope that we are favored of the Lord and are each entrusted with work no other can do. So may we secure the Lord's blessing—along with a personal key to heaven. □

—C. W.