

The Transformation of St. Peter

Feast of St. Peter the Apostle (2nd Sunday after Trinity)

(From the Gospel: St. Matthew xvi. 13 ff.)

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? 14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. 15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. 18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The conversion of the apostles --their becoming new creations in Christ-- is nowhere more evident than in such stories as that of St. Peter. The change this man underwent as a consequence of this renewal is something far surpassing the results of the common, ordinary reasons that we see producing profound alterations in the conduct of people. For example, one might imagine that "winning the megabucks" would transform most anybody into a delighted, happy soul, without a care in the world. The media certainly present it that way. Or we can picture some great, all-consuming cause, such as patriotism, or devotion to an exalted leader, or subscription to a new belief, as altering people dramatically. Even religious belief would have to be included on this list. Religions do deeply affect their adherents, resulting sometimes in extremes in behavior including fanaticism, or severe asceticism.

But Christian conversion, which is precisely what we are dealing with here, is of an entirely different order. When we say that Peter was changed, we mean just that, and there is ample evidence within the scriptural accounts to prove it. This is why the matter of conversion is spoken of in the apostolic writings in such strong terms:

-For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. (Col. 3:3)

-I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me... (Gal. 2:20)

The Apostle Peter himself echoed these same sentiments decades later:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. (1 Peter 1:3, 23)

To die is...to be *dead*! To be *born again* is to reenter the world as an utterly changed individual. Were the features of the Apostles --those outward, physical characteristics that clearly set them off as certain individuals-- altered? Obviously not. When the post-Pentecost Peter and his companions were testifying before the Jewish ruling council, they were immediately recognized as men who had *been with Jesus* (Acts 4:13). But their behavior, their conviction, their boldness

caused the council to *marvel*, even though they were *perceived as unlearned and ignorant*. They were men who by faith had died with Christ, with all the implications associated with the process of death, but who had also been raised with Him, with all of the accompanying evidences of life. This is simply the story of every true Christian conversion.

Today's Gospel will help us to see that mere religious conviction is not enough when it comes to full citizenship in the Kingdom of God, because it is here, in Peter's famous confession of Christ, that we find Peter performing the finest and most exalted service that a follower of Christ could offer Him, and still not be truly born again. Peter confesses Jesus to be *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, a statement of truth that Jesus attributes neither to Peter, nor to *flesh and blood* in any form, but to His *Father which is in heaven*. Peter, not yet *born of the Spirit* (John 3:6), because the Spirit had not been given, spoke this in this instance with a faith given him by God, for which Christ praises Peter: *Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona*. It was almost as if this marvelous confession had come out of Peter's mouth hardly by his own volition.

We all love this man Peter, because in the extremes that mark his life, his exuberance, his foot-in-mouth tendencies, his great failures and glaring shortcomings, he represents someone with whom we can all eminently relate. There is nothing perfect about pre-Pentecost Peter. He seems to know no moderation, whether of faith, on the one hand, or willfulness and presumption, on the other. He is the only Apostle who merited not only Christ's highest praise but His stiffest rebuke which occurred just after today's Gospel account, when Peter had taken it upon himself to criticize Jesus for speaking to His disciples of His coming Passion:

But he turned , and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men. (Matt. 16:23)

But it was during the Passion account that this dear man was to learn most dramatically about the depths of his sinful heart. After swearing undying fealty to Jesus in Gethsemane, he denied him three times outside the high priest's palace. His faith, his three years of intimate discipleship with Jesus, all his bravado and boasts, collapsed inwardly upon him in a moment of time, and left him with nothing except the emptiness of his own soul.

He may be down for the count, however, but he is not out! Within a very short few days we will find him running to the tomb of Christ, and witnessing the aftermath of the resurrection. He will see the risen Christ with his own eyes, and, together, with all the apostles, will receive the commissions that were among Christ's last words, including the promise of the soon arrival of the Holy Spirit.

When we consider the topic of this great apostle, the Spirit's arrival in his life on Pentecost is of utmost importance, because it is by the Spirit alone that Peter graduated from merely being at his very best a religious man, with religious convictions and religious opinions, to being a new man, having died with Christ, and raised with Him again to new life.

What is this new Peter like? How is he different? How will he truly fulfill Christ's declaration that Peter will be the *rock* upon which Christ said...

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The book of Acts provides evidence, including instances such as that described in today's Epistle. How could, the impetuous, scramble-headed Peter who could barely make up his own mind about personal things, let alone provide vital leadership to the brand new Church, become its chief spokesman, preaching with intelligence and tremendous force and conviction, so much so that thousands of Jews immediately came to repentance? How did he become a man of such conviction and stature that his wisdom and clear-sightedness were so desperately needed? How could he have received a commission directly by God to put aside ancient racial taboos about association with non-Jews to willingly and openly preach the Gospel to them? How did he possess the faith to trust in the Lord's deliverance as he went to sleep in a prisoner's cell surrounded by fully armed Roman soldiers, awaiting his likely execution the next day? And finally, how did he face eventual martyrdom, one foretold by Christ Himself (John 21:18), when, according to tradition, he was crucified upside down?

It is very hard, in the most delightful sort of way, to reconcile the two general epistles of Peter, which are a part of the canon of the New Testament, with the rugged, earthy fisherman who once knelt before the feet of Jesus and proclaimed unto Him in desperation: *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!*, following one of the Lord's great miracles (Luke 5:8). The First Epistle of St. Peter is lovely, and flowing, and filled with gentle wisdom and practical counsel. Its chapters have pointed generations of believers toward those characteristics that make up a truly mature, spiritual person. It is the work of a man whose every natural element of giftedness has been transformed by the work of the Spirit into something great, eternal, and utterly beyond any earthly explanation. His second letter, by contrast, is filled with stern warnings, and one can almost see his face, alive with the light of holy anger against false teaching and all enemies of the church, as he penned these words. His epistles too are evidence of a man who has both died and been reborn.

Finally, in today's Gospel, Jesus bestows upon the apostle both *the keys of the kingdom of heaven* and the power to make decisions which heaven itself will honor as to what to *bind* and *loose* on earth. Peter, when once he is spiritually reborn, will possess authority that exceeds that of any man on earth. Himself completely demolished, as it were, and now totally rebuilt in Christ, he will be that sure rock upon which Christ will actually found His church.

May we follow the great Apostle through spiritual death and rebirth, that we might find our own place in what Peter described in terms that surely grew out of his encounter with Christ described in today's Gospel:

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame." 7 Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone," 8 and "A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense." (1 Pe. 2:4-8a)

Together with Peter the rock, we, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house whose weight rests entirely upon its chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.