

Good Friday - Celebration of the Lord's Passion
(Isaiah 52:13-53:12 / Hebrews 4:14-16. 5:7-9 / John 18:1-19:42)
15.04.2022

In our reading of John's Passion narrative on this Good Friday, I propose that we take a moment to consider Peter's thrice repeated denial of the Master.

Three times Simon-Peter (the man blessed by God, called and chosen by Christ to hold a very special place in the company of His disciples) said to those who recognised him to be a follower of Jesus: I am not a disciple.

Peter, to whom Jesus had given the name Rock, had declared shortly before his denial of discipleship that, even if all the others would lose faith in the Master, he would not lose faith. When it came to the crunch, however, he proved to be far from firm in his commitment.

Clearly, Peter forgot momentarily the magnificent profession of faith he made at Caesarea Philippi when he had declared, when no else was yet ready to do so: You are the Christ.

Just like Peter, we might like to think that our faith will never waver; we might like to think that we will never let the Lord down... and yet, when hard times come our way, so readily we can do so. Difficult as it may be for us to admit to it, the truth is that everyone of us can be as fickle and faint as Peter was when he said of Jesus: I do not know Him.

While we are men and women who would like to think we are ready for all, it happens that when we are under pressure and feel threatened in some way; when we find ourselves weighed down by trials and tribulations which are just too heavy to bear, we show ourselves up to be fit for little or nothing. When we are pulled this way and that, like the apostle Peter, we can break under the strain. Even the seemingly stronger among us can weaken and wane.

The question we might pose in regard to Peter is this: How could he have weakened the way he did and so quickly? That same question is one we might just as readily apply to ourselves. To answer it, let's stay with what the Gospels tell us about what happened between Peter's declaration of unflinching faith and his thrice repeated denial. When we do that – bearing in mind the insights given to us by the Synoptic Gospels' Passion narratives – we are given to see that what intervened between those two crucial moments (Peter's declaration that he would never lose faith in Jesus and his denial of ever having been a Christian disciple) was the halt the Master made with His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We spent our Time of Watching last evening with that Gospel scene, punctuating our time of Vigil with the reading of verses taken from St Matthew's Passion narrative. Let's refresh our memories in regard to what we heard in that text.

The Master had brought the disciples to the Garden to keep vigil with Him, while He communed with His Father in prayer. We see how Jesus chose Peter and the two sons of Zebedee (James and John) from among the Twelve, asking these three to keep closer watch with Him. But, as the text shows us, instead of remaining awake, staying vigilant, watching and praying, the disciples slumbered and fell asleep.

The text accentuates how Jesus singled out Peter from the little inner circle of the the Three. We read in the text: He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping, and He said to Peter: So you had not the strength to keep awake with Me one hour? You should be awake, and praying not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Although they had been roused by Jesus and exhorted to pray, even after this warning, the Three, Peter among them, had fallen asleep once again.

In our bid to answer the question we posed specifically about Peter, what we need to grasp is that he had failed to keep vigil and remain faithful to prayer. Surely, this contributed to his weakening and downfall. Peter had been warned that his own strength would not be sufficient to keep him from falling. Jesus had told him that he needed divine help and how to avail of it, but Peter didn't take the Master's advice on board. When he most needed to pray, Peter failed to resort to prayer, wherein God's strength is made available to those who ask for it.

I suspect more than one of us gathered here today can readily identify with Peter in this respect. How many of us can say that we have never waned in our commitment to prayer? As a result, who among us has not proved to be more than a little brittle in our discipleship, despite the fact that we would like to be rock solid disciples?

I hear a call addressed to us today to humbly recognise our weakness – and the reasons for it. Our spirits are willing, but our flesh is weak.

According to Jesus' word, we should be awake and praying not to be put to the test. Are we? Like The Twelve, and within that group the inner core of The Three, Jesus invites us to keep watch and pray. I am inclined to think that many of us will strive to do that at times, but I somehow doubt if we actually manage to do so as consistently as we should.

Let us ask ourselves honestly: Do we pray, not just in fits and starts, but consistently? Do we pray without ever tiring of prayer, without ever giving up on prayer?

As Christian people we are all called to pray without ceasing. There are multiple exhortations in this sense throughout the New Testament. Already the Old Testament prepared the way for that in its multiple declarations in regard to constantly meditating upon God's word.

Where do you and I stand in regard to incessant prayer?

If all Christians are bidden to pray without ceasing, those of us who have made monastic Profession have been called to be really vigilant in regard to prayer. As a community we were reminded of that recently through that question addressed to our brother who made his Solemn Vows at the heart of our Lenten journey. The question addressed to him is one for all of us to answer: Are you resolved to live for God alone... in persevering prayer, constantly meditating on the Sacred Scriptures?

The simple truth is that none of us will ever manage to stand firm relying upon our own strength alone. In the words of the Good Pope John XXIII: We are frail human creatures and we need a Higher Power to sustain us in all that life may bring. I find much humble insight in a prayer that saintly pope composed for himself which I dare to make my own at times – admitting that I am not always as faithful to this prayer as I should be. Pope John XXIII prayed at the more challenging moments of his life: Every day I need You, Lord, but today especially, I need some extra strength to face whatever is to come. This day, more than any other day, I need to feel You near me to strengthen my courage and to overcome my fear. By myself I cannot meet the challenge of the hour.

That last line is so important. It should be noted and taken on board by all of us. By myself I cannot meet the challenge of the hour.

None of us can meet the challenges set before us relying on our own strength alone.

The man Jesus realised His need to have recourse to prayer as He prepared Himself to meet the challenges which awaited Him. It was this that had led Him to the Garden across the Kedron Valley. What Jesus realised to be true for Himself, He wanted Peter to understand as vital in his life.

Peter lacked the resources he needed to go it alone.

None of us has the strength to go it alone. No matter how well-intentioned we may be, we lack the strength we need to manage all by ourselves.

How foolish we are when we think we have enough resources at our disposal to be self-reliant! This is what the Jesus wanted Peter to grasp when He told him: Satan wants you (as we heard in the Lucan Passion narrative read last Sunday), while assuring the apostle that He (the Master) would pray for him as he lived through his hour of trial – a time in which he would be sifted like wheat.

Also to be noted is what Jesus added at this point. The Lord said to Peter that when he came back from his time of trial and testing (including his failures and fall) he would be all the more apt to confirm and strengthen his brothers and sisters in the faith.

The point to be grasped here is that we can learn from our stumbles and our falls. Our weaknesses, our denials of the Master, can also be used to help us become what we are called to be: witnesses to the strength of God's grace made manifest in human weakness.

Poor Peter!

He was never more in denial than when he imagined he would never falter and fall.

Poor us when we are deluded in the same way!

We are really in denial when we refuse to admit to the truth about ourselves.

The truth is that we are, all of us, without exception, poor and needy creatures. We are all of us feeble, fragile, fickle human beings. This realisation should lead us not to lose heart, but to trust all the more in the Lord.

As the saintly Pope John XXIII reminds us in his Prayer for Strength, we need the Lord to hold our trembling hand. We need the Lord to stretch out His powerful arm to help us.

When fears risk to engulf us and when doubts submerge us; when accusatory fingers point us out and, in so doing, put our lives at risk; when the temptation is to deny who and what we are – who and what we are called to be: Christian disciples... we are called to rely on the Lord's power to save us.

When the cost of discipleship seems beyond us, how important for us to remember, above all else, that the Lord's love is upon us.

How important for us to rely not upon our own strength alone, but to place all our trust and all our hope in the Lord.

Amen!