

## **Sermon for Pentecost Evensong, All Saints Rothbury 12 May 2008**

Today is the anniversary of the start of the mission of the Ecclesia - Christ's body on earth. It began with only a handful of people - the apostles - yet here we are today. These apostles, who previously had not had the courage to even stand up with Jesus when he was being persecuted were suddenly changing the world. Peter who had denied that he had even known Jesus was now preaching to the multitudes. What happened? What caused such a significant change? And how can we experience that same kind of life-giving, life-inspiring change in our own lives? The second reading in Acts 2 shows us a powerful preacher who won 3,000 souls for Christ with that first brave sermon. Peter was the preacher - probably the most unlikely of men to take that role. So this evening I want to have a look at the phenomenon that is Peter. Being me, it will be done in a round about way!

During the first and second centuries, the symbol of Christianity was the fish. As you know this came from a diagrammatic representation of the initial letters in Greek of Jesus Christ, Son of God, saviour - which makes the word Ickthos - meaning a fish. I have heard of a preacher recently who decided that a fishhook would be the proper emblem for a Christian Preacher to use for winning people to Christ, so he had a little golden fishhook made to be worn on the lapel of his coat. It was a great talking point for person to person witness for Christ. Here was a fisherman for Christ who used a gold fishhook on his lapel to catch souls with. You may have some other kind of hook. It makes no difference as long as you catch fish.

When I was a kid we used to sing the chorus: I will make you fishers of men. Peter was transformed by Christ from life as a simple fisherman into the Apostle Peter – a great fisher of men for Jesus Christ! How did this happen? Matthew 4 tells us “And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” They immediately left their nets and followed Him.”

Jesus had picked a bit of a dodgy character in some ways. Impulsive, he spoke first and thought later, he tried to walk on the water and then started to sink. He blurted out something inappropriate on the mount of transfiguration, because he was excited and just wanted to say something and register the fact. Jesus has to rebuke him. Peter drew a sword and struck out when Jesus was

being arrested.

There is a spoof Management Consultant's report about the all disciples:

FROM: Jordan Management Consultants, Jerusalem 26544

Dear Sir:

Thank you for submitting the resumés of the twelve men you have picked for management positions in your new organization.

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience, leadership ability and proven capability. In particular we note that:

**Simon Peter** is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. **Andrew** has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, **James** and **John**, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. **Thomas** demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that **Matthew** has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. **James**, the son of Alphaeus, and **Thaddaeus** definitely have radical leanings, and they have both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and responsible. We recommend **Judas Iscariot** as your controller and right-hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory.

And this is the team that would become the Team to carry the message throughout the world.

Yes, Peter was impulsive - perhaps prone to bursts of anger. Peter is the one we remember who denied Jesus. Three times. Impulsive, and not that brave when it came to it. Not what you would select as a key member of your team.

But you see his heart was really all for the Lord, and God had given him insight. "But you" said Jesus, "who do YOU say that I am" and almost without thinking, he said "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" It was that saying, that great statement which was the rock on which the church was to be built.

After the resurrection, it was impatient Peter who got fed up first and said: "I'm going fishing". And some of the others followed. There was something about him that got others to go along with what he wanted to do. They fished all night and had no luck. Then Jesus was there on the shore. When John recognised him and said "It's the Lord" Peter threw on some clothes because you did not appear nearly naked in front of your teacher and lord, and then dashed into the lake and ran to him. Even though he knew that Jesus would have known about the denial. He just loved the Lord. And after breakfast Jesus gently gets him to expiate those three denials by asking three times if he loved him.

And that restored Peter - not restored him to Jesus, because Jesus loved him including and in spite of all his faults. No, Jesus restored Peter's own self confidence. He stood him back up, straight and tall. He built him up.

It was at Pentecost that Peter's strength and eloquence was given, and his courage too. At one minute they were keeping out of sight in case the Jews got hold of them - and in another minute they joyfully tumbled out into the street - laughing, crying, and shouting. They seemed to be drunk - and that is where our reading in Acts starts. Peter got up and denied it and launched into an amazing sermon - listen to what he says:

"This Jesus who God had attested as his son, this Jesus whom you crucified was raised to life. Death couldn't hold him". And a bit later; "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Wow - whom YOU crucified. Is this the Peter who denied the Lord? Is this the one who hid in the Upper Room? Is this the man whose faith failed on the lake? Yes of course it is.

If you want proof of the power of the spirit then take a look at Peter. Peter became a great fisher of men. He went on to play a key role in organising the early church - God had given him the necessary gifts of grace. It was Peter

who followed God's prompting and started to baptise Gentiles into the church. Even there, politically he had to wind back a bit from that decision, and it took a real row with Paul before the wheels were back on the rails. The early church had to stay close to God to get the direction right.

Traditions recorded in the apocryphal book the Acts of Peter, say that the Romans crucified Peter upside down at his request, because he was unworthy to be equated with Jesus. Josephus describes how Roman soldiers would amuse themselves by crucifying criminals in different positions, and it is likely that this would have been known to the author of the Acts of Peter. The position attributed to Peter's crucifixion is thus quite plausible.

Peter became a man of courage just as we can be men and women of courage who are not afraid to share the faith that we have in our resurrected saviour. And Peter was not a scholar like Paul - he was a fisherman who had been with Jesus and was now empowered by God's own spirit. He preached the first recorded Christian sermon. It even included a bit of Bible exegesis. If you had asked Peter 4 years ago to explain Old Testament messianic texts to a group of other people, his answer would no doubt have been forceful and firm and couch in un-churchmanlike language. That is what God can do in just a short time.

Let's all try to learn from Peter. Learn that God uses imperfect people. Learn that only God can transform us into people of courage. Learn that the Holy Spirit is there for all of us - not just Peter. It can give us courage, and the right thing to say at the right time. Learn that this courage enables us to share our faith even though we may feel totally unable to say a word - totally shy and embarrassed. But we can with God's grace, tell out the gospel, and become fishers of men and women.

Because if we don't do it, nobody else will!