

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Peter - the growth of a soul: The Disciple - Luke 22; John 13 and 21

As you all know, these talks, for *Truth for Today*, are recorded some weeks before they are delivered, so I am writing and thinking about what I shall say in the midst of the campaigning for the General Election that took place on 5 May 2005. When you listen to this talk the voting process will all be over and a government installed.

This political striving reminds me of an autobiography, I read many years ago, concerning the life of Hugh Dalton, who for a short time was Chancellor in Atlee's post war administration. His father was Canon of St George's Chapel at Windsor, an office that included preaching regularly to Queen Victoria and other members of the Court. This meant that Hugh Dalton enjoyed, what we should call today, a privileged background, being the only son of wealthy parents. Educated at Eton and Cambridge he looked set for a career that was suitable for someone of his background.

Dalton records, in the first volume of his life story, how things dramatically changed one evening, in 1907, when Keir Hardie came to his college at the university for a meal before speaking to the undergraduates. He writes: "In a crowded room I sat at his feet, literally and spiritually. I admired his total lack of fear or anger, his dignified bearing, his simplicity of speech, and thought and faith. That night I became a convinced socialist". He remained true to that creed to his dying day.

Our subject for today's study is the Apostle Peter and, if you were listening last week, you will have heard how he became a believer in a Person, rather than a creed or economic system, as was the case with Dalton. I want to show this morning that the effect on Peter, of his belief in Jesus, was life changing to a far greater degree than a mere change of political parties.

Perhaps we ought to briefly glance at Peter's declaration of faith in Christ. This dramatic confession grew out of Peter's conversion to the Lord Jesus. It is recorded for us in Matthew 16:15-17: "[Jesus] saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father in heaven."

I am absolutely convinced that true Christian conversion is primarily concerned with recognition of the divinity and greatness of Christ. This is what we accept, if we say that we believe in Jesus, for when Peter made that confession he was a Christian for life. He might fail, on occasion, as we shall see as we study his life over the next few weeks, but essentially he could never renounce the fundamental revelation that he had received at Caesarea Philippi, when he confessed that Jesus is the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16).

To become a believer in Jesus is not an end in itself, for God wants us to progress in the Christian faith. The Lord, Himself, requests this of His followers, as we can read in Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls".

To emphasise the point, I also want to include some words of Peter, written many years later, in fact, they are the last recorded words of his and are found in 2 Peter 3:18: "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever". I would suggest that these verses show that our Christian experience is not static. Alan Redpath once said: "The conversion of a soul is a miracle of a moment but the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime". This latter phrase is what I wish to enlarge upon, especially, how it affected Peter, as a disciple of Jesus, but before we do I want to enlarge in general terms on the subject of discipleship.

We ought to understand that the term "disciple" means someone who is taught, or trained, and the disciples in the New Testament were individually committed to the Lord. It is not that they were trained in abstract principles, because when the Lord was crucified they were devastated, and depressed, as can be seen in the demeanour of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, as recorded in Luke 24:13-35. When He was killed, their Teacher was gone, along with their hopes. The force of the relationship between the disciple and the Lord is seen in John 8:31-32: "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free".

Discipleship begins with a living belief in Him; it develops by continuing in His word. Unless there is this personal relationship between a man or woman, and the Lord, discipleship is impossible, for the question of sin will ever intervene between them. When the Spirit of God persuades us as to the uniqueness and divinity of Christ, and we accept that He is Lord, He becomes our Saviour. This means that the question of sin's penalty is settled forever, through His atoning sacrifice at Calvary.

There is also a further demand upon us, if we would be disciples of the Lord Jesus, and this can be found in Luke 14:26-27 "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, wife and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple".

These words, that are found in Luke 14:26-27, tell us that the relationship between the disciple and his Lord must be superior to any other. They do not mean that we can ignore the responsibilities that human relationships bring, or to extinguish the flame of human love.

Obviously, due to the constraints of time, we shall not be able to deal with the whole of Peter's story in the Gospels, so I shall limit myself by referring only to Luke 22, and to John 13 and John 21.

Firstly then, let us turn to Luke 22:7-13. Here we see that Peter and John were asked by the Lord to make preparations to celebrate the Passover Feast. There are a couple of things that I want us to notice from that command, the first being that obedience is an essential requirement in the life of a disciple. It might seem a light thing for Peter and John to prepare the Passover, yet it meant that they had to go to and buy a lamb, carry it to the Temple to be slain, and see that it was roasted, and placed ready for the meal, with the unleavened bread and bitter herbs. This was not a task requiring but a few minutes, rather did it require time, especially, with the large numbers of people who would be about a similar task. There is no substitute for diligence and obedience to the Master's requests in the life of a disciple of Jesus.

In his comments on this passage, FB Meyer reminds us of the priceless worth of a friend. "Though discipleship is essentially a personal matter between the Lord and each one of His own Christianity is a communal affair and service for the Lord is not usually a solitary affair." When the Lord sent out His disciples, on a teaching mission, he sent them out in pairs, therefore, from this passage, we see the importance of working together in unity. That is the second point.

Thirdly, we have to realise that when the Lord told them to follow a man, bearing a pitcher of water, he was telling them something that was against the spirit of the age. We do not know whether they had to wait long for the man to appear, if they did many doubts could have crossed their minds. A man carrying a pitcher of water was an unusual occurrence, as men usually carried water in leather skins. In like manner some of the demands upon us go against the spirit of the age but the duty of a disciple is to accept without question what we are asked to do.

There then follows in Luke 22:14-30 the detailed account of the Passover celebration with its institution of what has become known as the Lord's supper, or the communion service, the celebration of His death with bread and wine. It must have been a solemn occasion as the Lord spoke of His imminent death and of the betrayal that He was soon to suffer. What follows is a most instructive lesson for those of us who are followers of the Lord, for we find the disciples arguing as to whom was the greatest. I shall return to this in a moment to consider in greater detail the moral stance that ought to mark the followers of the Lord Jesus. May it be sufficient for us to notice the words of teaching that the Lord gives to His disciples on this occasion. They are found in Luke 22:26-27: "But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as he that serveth". From this, I think, we can judge what the attitude of a disciple ought to be in relation to serving.

This leads us on to the next incident where Peter is mentioned by name. We can read this in Luke 22:31-34: "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. And he said unto him, I am ready to go with thee, both to prison, and to death". As the "you" in Luke 22:31 is plural in the original it must refer to all of the disciples. The desire of Satan was therefore to prove that some of the disciples would fail in the crisis moments that were imminent. The "thee" in Luke 22:32 refers specifically to Peter that he might not completely fail. Some have questioned whether the Lord's prayer (Luke 22:32) was a failure as Peter denied his Lord as we all know too well. I would suggest that Peter eventually came through this event a stronger disciple as the rest of his life demonstrated.

His answer in Luke 22:34 shows the boasting that, I feel, was in the power of his own strength. It only took the words of a servant girl to show that this was idle boasting yet his faith did not disappear completely as we shall see as we look at another passage in a few minutes.

We have not the time to examine Peter's denial of the Lord Jesus in detail. We can only emphasise that it was the crowing of the cockerel brought back to Peter's remembrance the words of the Lord (Luke 22:61). Scripture then says that Peter went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:62). He had learned a basic lesson in a very distressing way. No flesh will ever glory in the Lord's presence, for we can only follow the Lord on His terms and in His strength. This is a lesson about discipleship that we all have to learn. Nothing, of lasting value, can be done in the service of the Master by natural power and unconsecrated lives. The prayer of the Lord for Peter was answered in the affirmative as Peter remained in the company of Christians. We can also learn from Luke 22:32 that the experience was to be a positive one, in that Peter was to strengthen his brethren in later times. Surely, then, this can be an encouragement to us as we endeavour to walk as disciples of the Lord Jesus in our world.

We shall turn now to John 13 that again reveals to us the Passover scene in the upper room. The first incident I want to highlight is in John 13:4-11 where, though there are other spiritual truths, I want to concentrate on the one that concerns our topic of discipleship. This is contained in John 13:4-5: "[Jesus] riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded".

Regardless of other lessons we have to witness the response of Peter to this display of humility by the Lord Jesus. The disciples had been guilty of striving between themselves as to their respective importance. How we need to learn the lesson of humility. We have already quoted the verse from Matthew that the Lord is meek and lowly of heart (Matthew 11:29) and here the Lord Jesus is giving the disciples a practical demonstration. He performs to their embarrassment the duties of a household slave as he moves around the circle to wash the feet of each disciple in turn.

It does not appear, though Peter objects to the Lord taking this lowly position, that he [Peter], or any of the others present, were prepared to finish the task. This meant that the Lord had to impress the implications of His actions upon the hard hearts of His disciples by saying: "Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well: for so I am. If then your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15). Here, I would emphasise again, is one of the most important lessons we can learn today as disciples of the Lord Jesus.

I remember a time when I was a teenage student on a day release course at the local technical college when the tutor was a Christian missionary working part time whilst away from the mission field. Somebody had drawn a cartoon on the board making a mockery of the tutor and hidden the board duster at the same time. All the tutor did when he came in was to clean the board with his handkerchief. That display of Christian humility had an effect on more than one person that day.

Our final passage of scripture this morning is from John 21. The context is of Peter leading the disciples back to Galilee to resume their former careers as fishermen (John 21:1-3). Had Peter persuaded himself that, though he was forgiven of the Lord for his lapse of faith, his days of useful service were over? If so, he is soon to be made aware that the Lord had need of him as a fisher of men again. We also need to know that disciples wait until the Master removes the commission. Another feature of John 21 is that the Lord had food waiting for them when they arrived at the shore (John 21:9). It might be a very hard lesson to learn for the disciple but God is able to supply all our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). If Peter and the others were on active service for Him then they had to be taught that He would provide.

We now move to the famous interview between Peter and his Lord (John 21:15-19). Some would say that this was where fences were mended and matters put right. As the Lord had already met Peter in a post resurrection situation, as we can read in Luke 24:1-12, I feel that Peter would already know that he had been forgiven. If there had been any matter that intervened between them one can hardly imagine Peter jumping out of the boat with such alacrity. What does take place is a re-commissioning of Peter's function in the soon to be formed church. It is interesting and instructive for us to view the place where the interview takes place. I quote the words of a Bible teacher I respect greatly to illustrate what I mean. "Then began the Lord's special dealings with Simon Peter. His fall had taken place when he was warming himself at the world's fire in the company of the servants of the high priest, who was utterly hostile to his Master. He now finds himself by the fire that had been kindled by his Lord, not only warmed but fed by Him, and in the company of fellow servants as devoted to his Master as himself. Thrice had Peter been tested and each time with increasing emphasis he had denied his Lord. Thrice on this occasion does the Lord probe Peter's conscience and heart, each time increasing the severity of the test." (FB Hole)

Mark well the lessons for us in that passage. If we desire to be disciples of the Lord Jesus we will be found with His people, eating the spiritual food that He provides and listening to His voice.

Regarding the interview between Peter and the Lord, I have just two comments. The first concerns the Lord's question, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" Some would ask to what "these" refers to in this

question. Is it the boats and the fisherman's life or the company of his friends or is it a measure of his love for the Lord when compared with that of his companions? I would judge that it is the latter because they were the measure of his claim in the upper room at the Passover supper. There he boasted, as we can read in Matthew 26:33: "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended". The claim that he alone would remain loyal must have been like a festering sore for when the test came it would appear that he loved the Lord less than the others.

The only comment that I wish to make about Peter's answers to the Lord's probing questions is his reply in John 21:17: "Lord, thou knowest all things: thou knowest that I love thee". Here Peter admits that the all-knowing Lord knows the measure of his attachment to Him. No boasting or idle claims now, Peter was being brought to a realistic grasp of the frailty of a natural man. The time would come when Peter would fearlessly stand before the tribunals of the world and witness a good confession. That, however, would be in the power of the Holy Spirit, for now he receives a commission from the Lord to feed His sheep (John 21:17). How he performed that task is the responsibility of another speaker to comment on. We have seen this morning how Peter was taught of the Lord in order that he might be a true follower and disciple.

May each of us, who love the Lord Jesus, seek by His grace to follow as disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, who we believe is the Son of God.

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