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Isolation Radio Talk

Sunday 28 June

Trinity 3

Peter and Paul

Peter - 'Quo Vardis'

Good morning. Real people; real people inhabit the pages of the Christian Scripture; that small group of women and men who were so shattered by the events of Good Friday were transformed again on Easter Day; then, on the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem that year; who they were, and what they were, burst like a mighty storm into human consciousness; they have remained there ever since.

I want to introduce you to that towering figure of that - and later days - Peter. He was tough; I mean it. Peter with his brother Andrew were commercial fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Then as now fishing was a tough trade – not at all like fishing on Blagdon Lake. The sea of Galilee is no millpond; it can suddenly produce ferocious storms; the gospel tells that Jesus and the disciples were caught in just such a one.

'Follow me', is how it all began for Peter; it was a dramatic event; no doubt with many consequences for his family, his partners in business, his income, his future. His response shows his character; it does not change. Impetuous is the first word you might use; opinionated too; he often seemed to speak without engaging his brain first.

He must have been the most difficult of disciples to work with; even Jesus rebukes him; on one occasion he turns to Peter and says, "**Get behind me, Satan!** You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns. Peter often gets the wrong end of the stick but he **is** the first to say out loud that Jesus is 'The Christ, the Son of the living God'; it is the same Peter who betrays Jesus as surely as Judas did; with an oath he says - 'I do not know the man'. After that comes the awfulness of Good Friday and the bewildering joy of Easter; again, we are told in the account of that day of Resurrection how he and John raced to the tomb, John paused outside but Peter rushed in. Later the man who was first and is now last says, probably to fill the void in his heart, 'I'm going fishing (Jn 21 :3). All night they caught nothing, then just as dawn was breaking Jesus stands on the beach. Peter recognises him and at once jumps out of the boat to get ashore first.

In the gospels it ends where it begins. Three times on that morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asks Peter, 'Do you love me' – in the end, clearly agitated Peter says 'Lord, you know everything, you know I love you;' 'Follow me' – Jesus said. As far as is recorded those two words were the first and the last words Jesus spoke to Peter. It is three years since Peter heard them first; they were turbulent years; years of faith, doubt, catastrophe. I do not doubt that some of you will say your own journey in or out of faith is similarly complicated, full of ups and downs.

A lot happened after those early days. They had travelled a long way in a small country but also in their understanding; it may have seemed straight forward; it was not. The politics of the Church and the turmoil of the city meant that they could not see clearly where all of it was leading. There was personal betrayal too: Peter, the first to follow the call, the first to confess the Christ at Caesarea Philippi, was also the last one to stand by him in Jerusalem; he also, by his denial, betrayed Jesus. He went out and wept – we are told - bitterly. There was that ferocious turmoil of betrayal,

arrest, conviction, execution and then, then, glorious news, first whispered; not really believed; and then mind filling and life transforming. He is alive, He *is* alive.

Still he was not yet alive for Peter. Even after Easter he was in turmoil. His decision 'I'm going fishing' seems to be a 'going back' to the security of early years. It had not yet dawned on him what the resurrection was all about; if it had you can bet he thought he had no place among the survivors.

Jesus named Simon as 'Peter' - in Greek, the word means 'Rock' - and said to his disciples; 'on this rock I will build my Church'; did he mean Peter? It seems so. Now at this last meeting Jesus, using Peter's old name, Simon; three times he asks Simon, 'do you love me?'. Could it be that Peter remembered the time in the house of Simon the Pharisee and the woman with the alabaster box of ointment. The truth is that those who love the most, are those who are forgiven most. It will be so for you, as for me; your love will not rest on your capacity for goodness or service; it *will* rest on God's great love for you and his continuing forgiveness.

If Peter thought the Lord's service would be straightforward, he was mistaken. Give up much; be somebody in community and society; be given authority, even power; this would be witness. Being a disciple is not the same as putting the world to rights. The Christ does not want hot heads who never stop talking; nor does Christ want servants, people who do what they are told; Christ wants friends. God's kingdom, this world, is not going to be built of ideology. The world has had plenty of those; history can show you the ruins. God's kingdom will be built on a communion of friends. The first step to this communion of friends, is to know you are forgiven and that you are loved; for when you are loved, then and only then, can you go out and love others.

Legend has it that some years later Peter once more fled, this time from Rome during the Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians. On the road he heard again the voice that once said, 'Follow me' - it now asked, 'Quo Vadis' - in Latin - 'Where are you going?' Peter turned again to Rome there to die a martyr's death.

Thank you for listening

Prayer

There is a very simple prayer, often said with eyes-wide-open looking at each other. I call it the Prayer of Fellowship. The intension as it is prayed, is to make the statement to all those you are praying it with - I am your friend, I am in communion with you, because we are loved by God, the Source of being, the Word made flesh and Holy Spirit.

The prayer's title is, 'The Grace'

I know I cannot see you face-to-face, so in my imagining, I am standing in a circle with you all, looking into the centre; seeing the One - who I spoke about a couple of weeks ago - The Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit / Source of all being, Word made flesh, Holy Spirit.

Let us prayer

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all,
evermore.
Amen.