

PETER

In the porch of the west door is a very beautiful arrangement with all the symbols we associate with Peter. We all like Peter. He always seems the most real. He's not as holy as John or as fond of money as Matthew or as simple as Philip or as contrary as Thomas. Nor, in the end does he betray Jesus as does the more glamorous, more exciting Judas Iscariot. We all know about Judas and we all recognise him in ourselves but my goodness we don't want to end up like him, thank you very much and how jolly unfair it would be if we were the one who was singled out in the whole of AD history as the betrayer and then died in that unpleasant way. So we can identify with Peter, his doubts, his hot temper, his determination that he knows best and above all his ability to pick himself up and start again, like in the monastic life, Peter falls down, he gets up, he falls down, he gets up, he falls down...you get the picture. So the decoration in the porch has a rock and nets and fish and keys and stuff representing the sea and perhaps a cross, curiously it is upside down. Perhaps it's a mistake. There aren't many apostles hauling round such a clutch of symbols as Peter, born into a perfectly ordinary family in an obscure village in a remote corner of the Roman empire.

What do we know about him? He was a fisherman. He was married. He was an early disciple, although it does not seem he was a disciple of John the Baptist. Two accounts say that Jesus saw him and another casting their nets and said *follow me* and they did. John's gospel said he was fetched by his brother Andrew. He was there at all the big moments, the transfiguration, the last supper, usually the one blurting out something not terribly appropriate but terribly human. He was there at Jesus' arrest and was perhaps the only one who tried to resist with force until Jesus stopped him. He could do things in the heat of the moment. Faced with the cold of the night and the beginnings of the interrogations and beatings, he denied Jesus and ran away. Then he came back. He was at the tomb and went in. He was at the lakeside when Jesus asked him about love. You cannot honestly say he is a speechmaker, but his transformation through the Holy Spirit means in Acts, he tells the crowd about Pentecost, makes speeches to the Sanhedrin and generally behaves with an inspiring confidence. He is the first to baptise gentiles and typically, goes back on it all when he returns to Jerusalem and faces the contrary views of Jesus' brother, James. He falls out with Paul in consequence. He is imprisoned at least twice and miraculously released. It is a reasonable supposition that he gave his account to Mark, a follower of Paul, which became Mark's gospel. He probably dictated one letter attributed to him and was probably not the author of the other. We probably know more about Peter than any other apostle except Paul. In consequence we think we know him. He offers the human element, the way into to the Jesus story.

In the Lord of the Rings, Sam the gardener, on the long trek to Mordor with Frodo, muses about the telling of stories and the one they might tell about Frodo the ringbearer, when Frodo interrupts him to say Sam has forgotten about one of the most important characters, Samwise the bold and how all the children will want to hear more about him. Sam is reproachful, thinking Frodo is making fun and he was being serious, but Frodo says he too is serious and that Frodo would not have got far without Sam. And we see that this is true, that Frodo and Sam are wholly dependent on each other, closer than brothers, they face death together. Jesus would not have got far without Simon Peter. He is the one who says "you are

the Messiah, the son of the living god". When Jesus asks all of them whether they want to go home, it is Peter who has the simple truth "Where can we go? You have the word of life."

I wonder if St Peter's Harborne wrote to St Peter's Rome and asked, whether they might consider some sort of twinning proposal? After all, the Pope is coming to Longbridge in a couple of months. It would not be that much of a diversion to stop off on the way and I am sure we could have a go at fund raising to go to Rome. We have a lot in common, apart from the obvious differences. It's not really that much more unlikely than a fisherman from the lake of Galilee going to Rome as leader of a new religion.

Jesus says to Simon son of John, I'm calling you Peter, the rock, petrus in latin, cephas in Aramaic. He furthers the joke by saying on this rock, I will build my church. Everyone knows you build houses on rock, not on sand. But in another way of looking at it, Peter is not so much rock and rocky, wobbling all over the place. Like Rocky Balboa in the movies, a man from the streets, a working man, all over the place, winning against insuperable odds in the end.

For the fact of the matter is, Jesus trusts Peter. What Peter does, is right. I am giving you the keys, Jesus says, the keys to it all. The whole of heaven. You keep the doors. What you say, goes. God will see it done. It's possible no-one, ever, in the whole of history, has been given so much power. And it does not change Peter at all. He's the rock, and he's rocky. Completely solid and wobbling about all over the place at the same time. Quite often he finds he cannot trust God. But Jesus trusts him. The least important thing Peter does is deny Jesus and run away. What did it matter? All the others had except John, the disciple Jesus loved. It was easily forgiven, what Peter has to do is forgive himself, a far harder act.

What happened to Peter? He left his family to follow God. Even if his wife came with him, his home, his life, all that he knew was on the shores of an inland lake. It's a long way from there to Rome, the hub of the empire. It seems likely that Peter travelled to Rome, to support the early church there. There is a story that after Peter went to Rome, the city was set on fire. A persecution of the Christians began under the Emperor Nero, who blamed Christians for the fire to appease the mob. Peter, who as a leader, was in particular danger, was advised to flee the city and did so. Outside the walls, frightened and hurrying along, he meets Jesus on the road, walking back towards the gates. *Quo vadis?* Peter asks him. *Where are you going?*

To Rome, Jesus says, *to be crucified anew, inasmuch as you are abandoning my flock*. Peter turns and goes back. He is arrested and put in the Mamertine prison, possibly with Paul. Peter is not a Roman citizen. He is put to death by crucifixion, upside down, because he declares that he is not worthy to suffer the same fate as Jesus.

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