

The First Disciples: Simon Peter.

We continue our overall theme for the year on discipleship with a look over the next few weeks at some of the first disciples. Those who Jesus particularly called and gathered round himself. His first team players if you like. And we kick off with Simon Peter. Simon, brother of Andrew who gets listed first every time. Jesus' right hand man so to speak. And one of the inner group of Jesus' three particularly close disciples. And the spokesman for the group.

You can choose your friends, so the saying goes, but you can't choose your family. You can't choose your personality either. You may well have heard of different tests that indicate personality. Maybe you've done one, or use them at work. Things like the Myers-Briggs indicator that asks a set of questions, and then gives scores that translate into four initials that describe your personality type. Introvert or extrovert, sensing or intuitive, feeling or thinking, judging or perceiving.

There are tests that describe personality as an animal. I did a very bizarre one at college a couple of years ago that had sharks, foxes and the like. Everyone wanted to come out as an owl which represented, as you might have guessed, wise behaviour. It caused great amusement to the group when I was asked what my score showed, and I revealed to the group that I was in fact a tortoise !! You can make what you like of that !!

Or perhaps you like those tests at the back of Sunday supplement magazines. Are you a good husband, wife, child, parent, pet owner or whatever it might be. Take the test and find out. If you scored 0-3 you are an absolutely abysmal pet owner. Make sure you feed your animal more often, etc.

From what we have to go on in the gospels I think Simon Peter would have come out on the Myers-Briggs indicator with a strongly extrovert, intuitive, feeling score. Put simply a 'go all out for it, in with both feet, look out here I come' kind of guy. Passionate, yes. Good company, probably. But dramatic and blowing hot and cold. Peter the rock? Peter the pendulum more like!

And yet this impulsive man was to be found in Jesus' inner circle.

The first disciple to be called, along with his brother Andrew, Peter would have initially come across John the Baptist and his teaching via his brother. He would have been exposed to the beginning ideas of the kingdom, God's kingship, and he would have heard from John a message of repentance and preparation. And so when Jesus came walking along looking at the boats on

that day, calling to the two fishermen brothers to follow him, Peter jumped (possibly quite literally) at the chance.

This morning I want us to think about three events, snap shots if you like, recorded in the gospels that feature Simon Peter and help us to think about what it means to be a disciple.

1. Walking on water.

The first is the one I read a few minutes ago. Jesus comes to the disciples on the lake, walking on the water. They're understandably agog. Jesus is after all defying the laws of nature. He's doing something they know can't be done. But suddenly in the midst of their goggling and amazement up jumps Peter wanting a go too ! Come on then says Jesus, and without thinking about what he's really doing, Peter steps out. He's defying all the laws that say it isn't possible to walk on water too. But then he looks down and sees the waves, begins to realise what he's actually done and understandably panics and starts sinking.

There's a picture here, I think, of what happens often in our discipleship too. We see Jesus doing great things. We see his example and we know that it would be fantastic if we could join him in that. And I'm not really talking now about walking across rivers or lakes or the sea, or even little streams. I'm talking about following his example of reaching out to people with the love of God, of living lives that reflect his priorities and care for others, of seeking to bring his peace and hope to our broken world. We get all excited and enthusiastic and we don't see the potential barriers and problems. We take that step out of the boat emulating Jesus and doing what he's doing.

But then we let our eyes drop for a moment to the waves below. Imagine going surfing at Newquay on a bright summers day with gorgeous weather, life guards all around and perfect surf. Then the next time you look there is an enormous wave coming, about to tower over you and sweep you off your board, the sun has gone and now the sea looks grey and threatening, and the life guards all seem to have disappeared. You feel utterly alone. It's you against the elements, and the elements are about to win. That's how it can feel as we try to bring Jesus' love into the world, that we are going to be eclipsed, swallowed up, that we are alone and we're going to sink.

And then in his fear and alone-ness Peter hears Jesus' voice and feels his hand reach out, as we do too. Come on, I know you've got faith. No more doubt, okay. Here! Grab hold of my hand. And our desire to quit because of

all the overwhelming factors against us is overcome by a touch from Jesus who happens to be just a hand hold away.

If your journey of faith is anything at all like mine, then it will have been characterised by lots of incidents of stepping out, followed by looking down and realising that I'm about to sink, before Jesus steps in

2. Declaration

Snap shot number two. Jesus has the disciples gathered around him at Caesarea Philippi and he's asking about who people think he is. So, who DO people say I am? Well, they can answer that no problem. Some say you're John the Baptist back from the dead, others think you're a prophet, Jeremiah perhaps or one of the others. Some think you're Elijah maybe?

Okay, that's fine. But who do YOU say that I am? Peter wades in with the answer on behalf of them all 'You, well you're the Christ, the messiah, you're the son of the living God'. Imagine the moment of stunned silence that followed Peter's words. I can almost hear the other disciples thinking oh he's gone and done it again. Shot his mouth off before thinking it through or as my dad used to say about my sister oh she's opened her mouth and let her belly rumble! But then instead of a telling off like they're expecting comes Jesus' reply 'that's right. And you didn't work that out for yourself. God revealed it to you. And I've got some words for you too. You are Peter. You are the rock that the church is going to be built on.'

How exciting that must have felt to Peter, to have something right for once. To receive praise for diving in with both feet, instead of having mucked it up. But unfortunately the rosy glow doesn't last long. The next thing that Matthew tells us in his gospel is that Jesus begins outlining what must happen to him. That he's going to go to Jerusalem, that he'll suffer at the hands of the religious authorities, that he's going to be killed, but he'll rise again on the third day. Peter dives in again. 'Never! That's the last thing that God would want. That's not going to happen to you, Lord' He quite naturally wants to protect his beloved Jesus from suffering. He can't see that those actions could be of any benefit. He doesn't understand the bigger picture. Jesus has strong words for the man he's just said will be the foundation of the church. This time he calls him 'satan' and urges him to get behind him ie don't stand blocking my way forward Peter. You're not looking at things how God looks at them. Peter the rock is about the least rock like possible. Shifting sands at this moment, more like!

Imagine how deflated Peter must have felt by Jesus' words. Just when he thought he'd got it right too. How embarrassed and he was, and cross and confused and still not really sure what he did wrong.

And of course his ultimate embarrassment was still to come, waiting round the corner. That moment that Peter is probably most well known for. His 'denial' of Jesus before the cock crowed. His bitter weeping as he realised that all Jesus had predicted had come true, that he really had denied his lord, left him at the time he needed his supporters most.

Jesus uses weak and failing people to be his disciples. People who, if we're honest, are a bit confused by some of what we read in the gospels and learn about faith. People, like Peter who sometimes don't quite get it, who can't always grasp the bigger picture because the immediate, the now, is so pressing.

3. Reinstatement

The third snap shot to look at is Peter's reinstatement by Jesus.

At the very end of John's gospel, following Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples have gone back to fishing. They don't know what else to do. As they near the shore they see someone on the beach who looks familiar. Reminds them even of Jesus. As they draw closer they realise that it IS Jesus. True to form Peter dives into the water and wades ashore, so eager is he to be with Jesus. That image reminds me of a scene from the Tom Hanks film Forrest Gump.

Forrest Gump is a young man with learning difficulties. The film follows his life through early years at school, to service in Vietnam followed by life as a shrimping boat captain. There's a wonderful scene where Gump is driving his shrimping boat when he looks to the shore and sees his old army officer, Lieutenant Dan, standing on the pier watching him. Forrest is so excited to see Lieutenant Dan and so sure of his welcome, that he shouts and waves before abandoning the boat, diving into the water and swimming to the shore to greet him, only to be followed seconds later by his boat crashing into the pier.

Peter is so eager and excited to see Jesus, despite all that has gone before. Despite the fact that they have a 'history'. A more subdued character, someone less confident, might have hung back, waiting til last to greet Jesus on the shore. Embarrassed at the thought of their last encounter. The denial ringing in their ears.

But no. Not Peter. He can't wait to greet his Lord. And he's right to be sure of his welcome. Jesus reinstates Peter, asking for his love and commitment, and calling him three times to feed his sheep and lambs.

We may not all have Peter's particular personality, his extrovert nature, his 'look before you leap' mentality. But we all have the need to be forgiven for the things that go wrong in our discipleship. For the times when we couldn't see the bigger picture and so let our first reaction be our response. For the times when we know we've messed up, but don't know what could have been different. For the times when we've wept bitter tears knowing Jesus has been let down.

And we hear him reinstating us, asking us, do you love me? calling us to feed his sheep, his lambs.

Whatever else Peter teaches us about discipleship, his is characterised by deep love for Jesus and wholehearted commitment. It was Alexander Pope, the 18th century poet and satirist who wrote 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread' and we could say that about Peter. But maybe the lyrics of UB40 sum him up better, and us too. 'Wise men say only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you'.

Housegroup Notes. 24.02.08

The First Disciples: Simon Peter. Matthew 4:18-20; 14:23-26

Simon Peter, brother of Andrew, a fisherman, was in Jesus' inner circle of disciples. He is mentioned first whenever the twelve are listed, and acted as spokesman for the group.

Peter, as he is generally referred to, was given the name 'rock' by Jesus and told he would be the foundation on which the Church was built.

Known for his impetuous 'look before you leap' personality Peter spoke and acted first and thought later! Examples of this from the gospels include stepping out of the boat and walking on water towards Jesus, before looking down and beginning to sink (Matt 14); declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, before being rebuked for getting in the way of God's plan (Matt 16); promising to follow Jesus wherever necessary before denying him three times following Jesus' arrest (Matt 26).

Despite his mistakes, Peter loved Jesus and desired to follow him wholeheartedly. And as the lyrics of UB40's song go 'Wise men say "only fools rush in", but I can't help falling in love with you'.

For discussion.

1. Think through the events in the gospels that include Peter. Are there any that particularly captivate you or strike a chord with you? Why?
2. Peter stepped out of the boat to walk on the water with faith, but began to sink when he saw the wind and waves. What things would you 'step out' for? What things can make us sink?
3. Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but then demonstrated that he didn't really understand what that would entail. What teaching in the gospels do you find confusing? Is there anything you could do to find greater clarity?
4. Peter denied Jesus when he was challenged under pressure. What situations might cause you to deny Jesus?
5. Jesus reinstated Peter, calling him to 'feed my sheep, feed my lambs'. What do you think that meant for Peter? What does that mean for us today?

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