

Revelation 3:7-9 & Luke 22:54-62 Peter – (Im)plausible deniability

I realise that I speak from a position of ignorance about being a mother, but as the child of a mother on this Mothering Sunday I suspect that I can say with more than a little accuracy that just occasionally, from time to time, Mum's, your children must really let you down badly. Having said that, I also know that most mothers would never turn their backs on their children.

But I wonder if there is anything that a child could do which would so damage the mother/child relationship that it was beyond repair? And what about our relationship with Jesus? Could we ever go so far over the boundaries that he would wash his hands of us?

Perhaps, then, this is a good week to look at Peter.

Now, children have a little tendency to be over confident and a tad too self-assured and Peter is just the same.

There is the time when Peter boldly and confidently professes Jesus to be the Christ – the Messiah, God's chosen one, but then when Jesus begins to explain that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die – well, Peter knows best! Mark tells us in chapter 8 that "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him".

Peter is also confident enough to answer questions on behalf of Jesus without needing to consult him. Take for instance the time in Matthew 17 when the tax collectors ask whether or not Jesus pays the temple tax, "Yes he does!" replies Peter.

And then as the disciples sit with Jesus and he breaks bread and wine in Luke 22:33 Peter boldly declares, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."

Yes, Peter's self-penned biography up to this point would be pretty impressive; He is Peter – the Rock!

Still, just as mothers know children a little better than they themselves do, perhaps it would be good to see Jesus' take on Peter and that would be a wise move because Jesus shows us things from a completely different angle. Although Peter may have declared Jesus to be the Christ, when Peter rebuked him for wanting to go to Jerusalem, Jesus' response was quite clear, as The Message translates it, "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works." So Peter did not always think in a godly manner.

Then we come to Peter answering the question about Temple tax on Jesus' behalf. Well, perhaps Peter should have thought twice before rushing in. The temple tax was controversial; it was not compulsory like the Roman taxes, but a matter of patriotic pride – it paid for the daily upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Most people paid it annually, but the members of the Qumran community, for example, only paid it once in their life time. After Peter's confident statement on his master's behalf, Jesus took him aside and quietly showed that whilst he was not obliged to pay the temple tax, he did so on this occasion so as not to cause offence, and also so as not to embarrass Peter! Peter sometimes got a little above himself.

And finally here we see that Peter did not always know himself as well as he thought he did because although he swore to always stand by his master we come now to his most embarrassing moment – his denial of Jesus.

But let's not be too hard on Peter because it isn't that he is simply a poor follower of Jesus, he is also under attack himself.

At the Last Supper he says, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Jesus warns Peter that Satan is out to get him, but notice that Satan cannot overpower Jesus’ authority – Satan has to ask Jesus’ permission to test Peter and that importantly Jesus has prayed for Peter that his faith will not fail. So look, it doesn’t matter how much pressure Satan puts on us to abandon our faith - we need to remember that if we trust in Jesus then in him there is the power and authority to overcome the devil.

But Jesus knows already that like many of us Peter will struggle, however this verse also carries the hope that this need not be the end of Peter’s relationship with Christ, listen again to the last part of Jesus’ statement, “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Well, let’s take a step back and look at the possible Causes for Peter’s denial of Jesus, because I think that there can be a lot of parallels between him and us, a lot of lessons to learn and a lot of warnings to heed.

Why did Peter deny knowing Jesus? Was Peter over-awed? Let’s not forget that here was a humble fisherman, rough hands, rough language, rough lifestyle. He has spent three years on the road with Jesus with precious little to call his own and now here is Peter hunched by a fire in the courtyard of the High Priest – the High Priest! Him, Peter, in the courtyard of the High Priest! He must have looked around at the splendid setting and perhaps felt intimidated and inadequate.

Sometimes being in a new environment can do that to us; a new school, a new place of employment, a new town, or if we are invited round to someone’s home.

But listen to what God says to the prophet Jeremiah when he objects to his mission to the rich and the powerful, “Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land— against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the LORD.”

Well, OK, but Perhaps Peter was just scared – wouldn't you be scared? Imagine here is Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends. His group's leader has been arrested and most of the other followers have fled – all except Peter who would be known by the guards because he had cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when Jesus was arrested. Suddenly Peter looks around and realises that he is trapped!

If they could arrest Jesus and put him on trial illegally they wouldn't think twice about doing the same to Peter. Over the centuries many Christians have been arrested and in fear for their lives denied their Lord and Saviour. Imagine if we lived in a society where our faith was persecuted, how would you react in danger of arrest, torture and probable execution?

No, if it was fear which drove Peter to abandon Jesus then he certainly wouldn't be alone in his denial. But listen to what Jesus says to the struggling Churches in Revelation, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer...Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

How about a sudden feeling of intellectual inferiority? Let's face it Peter is looking in on the religious leaders tearing strips off Jesus and he isn't even defending himself. Perhaps Peter had got it wrong – after all he was only a fisherman, what did he know about theology?

Well, haven't you ever found yourself in that sort of company? The secular scientist who quotes Dawkins and argues that you can't be a rational human being in a scientific world and still believe in an imaginary friend whom you call God.

Then of course there are the religious leaders of today; the vicars, bishops and theologians who will tell you that you can't believe in the Jesus you read about in the Bible. He just died to show us what a good man he was and how he cared about us. He didn't really perform any miracles and of course the resurrection was all a bit of an exaggeration.

These people have theological degrees, MA's, PhD's – they lecture in universities and write books and you think that because you have attended a home group for six months and done your Explore quiet time notes every day that you know more than them – really? Shut up, sit down and don't embarrass yourself, after all, they're the experts, they're probably right.

But listen to Jesus in Matthew 23:13; “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” And in 1 Cor 1:19 Paul makes the point that God says; “For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

Then again Peter might have just been ashamed of Jesus. Was he hoping for Jesus to be revealed as a great and mighty warrior king? Well, the dishevelled and beaten individual in the high priest's house looked nothing like that. Have you ever been ashamed of Jesus? Embarrassed to stand next to him? Then take care because in Matthew and Luke Jesus himself declares

“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.” (Matt 8:38)

And looking ahead to the Messiah Isaiah prophesied that he would appear to us just as Jesus did that night, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.”

Then again, maybe it was because Peter was speaking to a servant girl. Was she pretty? Did she turn Peter's head? Many a Christian boy or man has denied Christ for the sake of a woman they've fallen in love with and many a girl or woman has done the same for an unbelieving man. Perhaps in a moment of weakness Peter chose the possibility of a future with this servant girl rather than an eternity with Christ.

Perhaps Peter was just stalling, buying a little time so that he could stay near his master and friend, but whatever his motivation the outcome was the same – just as Jesus had predicted, Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times and then (again, just as Jesus had predicted) the cock crowed.

In verses 61 and 62 of chapter 22 Luke tells us, “The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times. And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

Now maybe as we looked at the possible causes for Peter's denial of Jesus you recognised yourself – your saw things that you do, attitudes or weaknesses that you share.

Without making you feel overly burdened with guilt, I wonder whether or not you brush that aside when it happens, or do you and I feel the same sense of burning devastation welling up in our hearts and eyes that Peter did?

But this is not to leave us wallowing in self pity, or hopelessness because that is not where Jesus left Peter. Of course, it would have been easy for Jesus to do that, Peter deserved to be there. But notice that when the cock crows Jesus didn't turn to Peter and mouth "Traitor", or shake his fist, or even point, Jesus simply makes eye contact. Peter remembers his guilt, but perhaps Jesus is even then silent before his accusers because he is praying for his friend.

Now, come with me to the empty tomb, the horrors of the cross have passed. Judas may have died without witnessing the Cross and Pilate might have shut himself off from it, but Peter and John stood near the cross of Christ and saw him die for the sins of the world.

As the women arrive on the first Easter morning they encounter the risen Jesus who gives them this instruction, "go, tell [Jesus'] disciples and Peter" the good news of the resurrection (mark16:17). Interesting, don't you think, that Jesus singles Peter out for special mention. Why? Because I suspect that Peter was still devastated over his denial.

And then we almost travel full circle to another miraculous catch of fish when the risen Jesus calls to Peter and other disciples who are out fishing. John realises that it is Jesus and Peter literally goes overboard with excitement.

He swims to the shore and then just as he denied knowing Jesus three times, Jesus now gives him three opportunities to renew his commitment; John 21 tells us the story;

Three times “Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? He answered, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Because of Jesus’ grace Peter has been able to undo his denial and whatever it was that had pulled him away from faithfulness in the high priest’s courtyard would never manage it again. So no wonder then that Jesus’ next words to Peter are a commission; “Feed my sheep.”

Listen, I am always deeply saddened when I meet someone who believes that because of something they said or did they have damaged a relationship beyond repair, perhaps you know a mother and child like that. And you might think that if we denied Jesus with our lips or our lifestyles he would say to us, “That’s it! I’ve had it with you! Get out of here and never darken my doorstep again.” But the fact that we lived lives in total denial of God’s authority, holiness, justice, power, might, love, righteousness and grace is precisely why Jesus came and died and rose again – not so that we can abuse his mercy, but so that we can be assured of his grace.

If you feel far away from God, if you believe that you are not worthy to be called a brother of Christ, look into Peter’s eyes this morning and see that they no-longer weep with bitterness, but with the joy of a restored relationship and like Peter don’t trust in your own self-evaluation, but rather trust in Jesus who knows we are sinners, but who still loves us and who alone is strong enough to rescue us from Satan and restore us to our loving heavenly Father. Amen.