

THE GALILEAN ACCENT

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The story of Peter's denial of Christ told in the Scripture reading (Matt. 26:69-end) is one of the most vivid accounts in all of the New Testament. All four gospels contain the incident. It is vividly described in Mark, and according to tradition Mark is essentially the preaching of Peter — at least it draws heavily on the recollections of Peter for events in the ministry of Jesus. The interesting point about this is that we have the story of Peter's denial, because Peter himself seems to have told it to others. One might think that a story of this kind which puts a leading apostle in a less than shining light might have been hushed up. But Peter's martyrdom in Rome at about the same time as Paul's would be ample testimony to the church of Peter's ultimate faithfulness that more than redeemed this action of apparent denial.

What an honest story this is! Peter earlier at the Last Supper had assured Jesus that he would never deny Him, or fall away from Him even if all the others were to fall away, even if, says Peter, "I were to die with you". But Jesus had said, "This very night before the cock crow, you shall betray me three times."

Then after supper Jesus went into the garden of Gethsemane with Peter and two other disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. He asked them to watch with Him as He prayed with a troubled soul and grieving heart that the bitter cup of suffering might pass Him by. But after a bit He found them asleep and He said to Peter, "Couldn't you watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

And Jesus went off to pray a second time, and prayed, "Father, if this cup will not go away unless I drink it, then Thy will be done." And He came again, and found them asleep again. And as Matthew tells us, Jesus went off a third time, praying the same words, and came back to find His disciples still asleep, and said, "You may as well sleep on — the time has come for the Son of Man to be betrayed. Get up, let us be going. He that is to betray me is coming."

In this vivid scene in the garden attention is usually drawn to the agonized prayers of Jesus and His final sense of being reconciled to the will of God. But at the same time we have a vivid symbol of the falling away of Peter and the others when danger threatened and the chips were down. Three times Jesus asks them to watch and pray — and three times He comes to find Peter and the two others asleep, indifferent to His agony. In a sense, before the cock crowed even once, before the first of the four night watches was over, Peter had already denied his master three times in turning a deaf ear to His plea to watch and pray. And a sermon could be preached on the tragedy of sleeping, indifference, when another is in agony.

But this is not yet a direct denial, nor is it a betrayal. It is Judas who comes to betray Jesus to His accusers by his kiss of death. And yet even here there are persuasive arguments that Judas, the Zealot, of the revolutionary party, may by his action have meant to force Jesus' hand, to compel

Him at last to take strong action against the authorities, to proclaim His rightful place as the Messiah, and to usher in the new kingdom.

It seems inconceivable that one who had been an intimate of Jesus would betray him because of greed for 30 pieces of silver or hatred because Jesus was not the military Messiah he hoped to see. The betrayal would compel Jesus to assert His authority — so Judas may well have thought. He'd never let the soldiers take him, Jesus said. We can imagine Judas' horror, then, when this did not happen, when he saw he really had betrayed Jesus to His enemies. This would explain the utter despair which led him to hang himself.

Peter's reaction was not this kind of betrayal, clearly. What was it? When Jesus is led off by His captors, after one of them has been wounded, John says it was Peter who drew a sword and cut off the ear of the servant Malchus; we are told by Mark and Matthew that then all the disciples deserted Him and fled. But then we are told, Peter followed Jesus afar off, trailed Him until He was taken into the house of the high priest. Now why? Certainly not to betray Jesus. The damage was done — his master taken. Everyone had deserted Him — but Peter followed from afar. And then he goes into the very courtyard of the palace of the high priest. This would be a central open area with rooms all around. He would have gone into the very center of the enemy's stronghold. This is not the act of a cowardly man. What did he intend to do?

It looks as if he went there to see things to the end, to see what he could find out. What are they going to do to Jesus? What can be done? What can I find out? These may well have been questions in Peter's mind. There is every reason to believe Peter was acting the role of spy.

But as he stood around the fire in the courtyard, someone threw some thorns on the fire, the light blazed up and a maid recognized Peter, and said, "This man was with Jesus". What was he to do? His cover was blown. And Peter denied it in the face of them all. He then went to the gateway where another girl identified him. Now he was getting excited. He began to swear he never knew the man. And then some bystanders insisted, "Surely you are one of them, one of those Galileans. Your accent gives you away." And Peter with more cursing insisted, "I do not know the man." Then came the cock-crow, probably a trumpet call announcing the changing of the guard at the beginning of the fourth watch, 3 am. Gallicinium was the military term for trumpet call; it meant cock -crow, too. And Peter remembering what Jesus had said about his disowning Him, went outside and wept bitterly.

We do not know what happened next. Peter does not tell us through Mark. We can imagine his unhappiness, his frustration, his self-condemnation, his feeling of foolishness, failure, defeat — and his grief.

To think it was his accent that gave him away! The Galileans had a burr in their speech — and they stressed the guttural sounds. It sounded odd in the ears of the Judeans. It is as if a Scotsman from the north found himself in a group of hostile Londoners, and when one says, "Blimey, if 'e hain't one of them, too" responds, "Ye dinna ken what you're ta'ken about."

This is the literal meaning of the Galilean accent, of course. But with Peter, it takes on a symbolic meaning as well. The Galilean accent is the expression of the love of Christ that seems to affect all those who came to know the Galilean well, in their encounters with Christ. And if we read the gospels sympathetically, we can find that Peter expresses that accent in the spirit of his heart and not just with the sound of his voice.

This man Peter was indeed a remarkable figure among the disciples and in the early history of the church. He seems to be neglected in a way, to fall in the shadow of the beloved disciple John, for example, and the activist apostle, Paul. Yet early on he seemed to catch the symbolic Galilean accent from Jesus and remained all his life a leader in spite of that dramatic and painful episode in the courtyard of the high priest. He is the first of the disciples to be chosen. According to the synoptic gospels, Jesus found Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea of Galilee, and He invited them to come with Him to be fishers of men. It is later that Jesus calls Simon Peter.

Simon is the same as Cephas or Petros in the Greek — which means Rock. Jesus calls him the Rock when Peter is the first of all the disciples to recognize Jesus as the Christ. Strange term, for Peter was not at all rock-like in his stability or dependability, as we have seen. When Jesus calls him to follow him and to be a fisher of men, Peter replies, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” And yet he becomes a kind of spokesman and leader of the disciples. There is more than one reference to them, as Peter and the others.

He seems to be energetic rather than serene, enthusiastic and volatile, not calmly stable. He vacillates between confidence —over-confidence sometimes — and a sense of failure. He is the one disciple who when they see Jesus walking on the water, strikes out to do the same himself, only to lose heart, and cry out to Jesus to save him. And yet he is called the Rock by Jesus and Jesus promises that he will be a foundation of the church. It is Peter who protests when Jesus openly tells His disciples about His future trials and death, and Jesus rebukes him, saying, “Get behind me, Satan. You do not know the things that are of God.” It is Peter who denies his Lord as we have seen. Yet when we turn to the Acts of the Apostles we learn that it is Peter who rallies the disciples; both Luke and Paul report that he is the first witness of the Resurrection. It is Peter who is a rock of strength in the growing community of believers — until he is eventually martyred in Rome, choosing to be crucified upside down, saying he was unworthy to die as his master did.

What then do we make of Peter, so full of contradictions — strength and weakness, loyalty and denial, timidity and courage, an overconfidence that made him swear he would never desert or disown his Lord, and the ignominious failure which he made no effort to excuse or deny.

What we find in Peter, I think, is what we find in every true disciple or follower of Jesus, in any encounter with Christ — the receptive response to the spirit of God’s love through Christ. Peter, in spite of his instability, his volatility, his moods of self-accusation and his feelings of inadequacy, truly loved Jesus. It was the spirit of love that opened his eyes to see Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, the redemptive love of God made flesh. It was love which inspired him to leave his nets and follow Jesus; it was love that encouraged him to follow Jesus even to the

attempt to walk on the water. It was love that made him follow Jesus when all the others had fled, which drew him to the very heart of the enemy camp to see what he could see, to hear what he could hear, about the fate of his beloved master. And it was love frustrated in its attempt to do something that made him dissolve in the bitterness of tears. We must not forget it was the courage born of love which made him go into the courtyard in the first place, to remain there doggedly even when he was recognized. It was love which made him remember Jesus' words as the trumpet sounded. It was love that sent him out into the night to weep his tears of frustration. And it is love which covers a multitude of sins.

When we take the whole gospel tradition into account, we find a beautiful expression of Jesus' recognition of this love of Peter. It is the passage from John read in the scripture lesson. Jesus has just appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. This is the third appearance by the sea of Tiberias — Jesus had told the disciples who were fishing to cast their nets on the right hand side of the ship, and they made a great catch. When they had breakfasted, Jesus asked Peter the question, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" He asked the question three times — a clear parallel to the three times that Peter denied knowing Jesus. Jesus in His forgiveness gives Peter the opportunity to wipe out his three-fold denial. There is no question about Peter's love now. "You know that I love you," says Peter.

But now it is clear what loving Christ entails. It brings the task of being a shepherd to His flock. We show we love Christ only by loving others. Love is a privilege, a joy, a triumph, but it is also a responsibility — and the most basic of God's commands.

It is interesting that John records this incident to show Peter as the shepherd of the sheep, Christ's people. Perhaps comparisons were made in the early church as now. Some might admire the lofty thought of John, others the heroic missionary work of Paul. Perhaps Peter, the fisherman, could not write or think like John; he did not voyage or adventure like Paul; but he is given the honor here, and the task, of being the shepherd of the sheep.

And this is what Christian love is all about, and how we can follow Peter. The important thing to remember — we don't have to be perfect in wisdom, solid in faith, absolutely serene and righteous in manner to follow Christ or to join His church. Peter wasn't, certainly. What is required is a love of God as revealed in Jesus. And with this love, like Peter, we become a new person, empowered by the creative love that inspires us to love one another, to help one another, and at the same time to see ourselves as children of God. As Peter shows us: love covers a multitude of sins; love redeems us all. We need to be, like Peter, receptive to the love of God in Christ and so in our own way represent the Galilean accent. May we, inspired by the love of Jesus, learn that Galilean accent, and speak and live with the accent of Christ.