

H G Wells once said “A man can be a bad musician, and yet be passionately in love with music” and I think that is a good analogy for what I want to say about Peter today because no matter how badly we may think of Peter's behaviour there is no doubt in my mind that Peter was passionately loyal towards Jesus.

The narrative of Jesus' arrest and trial is in all four gospels; each slightly different, but collectively one fact emerges unchallenged that only Peter and John follow Jesus after his arrest; all the other disciples flee in fear of their own arrest and worse. That shows loyalty in its truest sense.

Whilst we are not told what John was doing during the following hours we know that Peter enters into the courtyard. He would have known he was walking into a hostile environment and that takes courage.

Fresh out of police training school and still very wet behind the ears I was sitting in a patrol car beside a very experienced officer called Ron who had been around the block more than a few times when we responded to an all cars call to attend a fight at the Duke's Head pub.

I had assumed Ron would trigger the blue light and neh naw but instead he drove at 29 mph on a circuitous route so we were actually the third car to arrive. Afterwards, I asked Ron about this and he said quite seriously that only courageous people and idiots voluntarily placed themselves in a dangerous situations and that he was neither of those.

Yet, that is exactly what Peter did which is why I take my hat off to him. Yes, in due course, his courage will fail him when his own safety becomes threatened but as Theodore Roosevelt famously said “It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed.”

And by the way, as an aside I think that sums up Jon's attitude to all the experiments were are doing on the sound and vision systems here at HTS.

But let's return to the courtyard. If anyone, like me, has lived near a farm which has a cock, you will know that they crow at all times of day and night but particularly they tend to crow about midnight, an hour or so before dawn and then at dawn itself. That stretches over quite a few hours and I think that was probably true of that courtyard too. Peter's loyalty and courage was tested over a number of hours, not just a few minutes.

And it's easy to imagine his resolve being sapped as first uncertainty and doubt then tiredness crept stealthily into his mind and body during those long and cold night hours.

Think of the attraction of that fire; the warmth and comfort it would provide on a chilly April night. Peter is drawn to it but in doing so he increases the potential of discovery. And being in the centre of the courtyard he would have a much better view of what was happening on the balcony above; of the coming and going of various people.

Loyalty and a degree of courage has carried Peter this far but he is challenged not once, not twice, but three times and his denials becomes more emphatic each time.

First, he simply says he doesn't know Jesus; then it becomes a bit more personal and he denies that he is actually one of Jesus' disciples and finally the cock crows for that third time and Peter with a hint of hysteria says “Man, I don't know what you are talking about!”.

And just as Peter says those words looking at the figures on the balcony, Jesus turns and looks at him. Looks straight at and through him. No angry rebuke just a look from the man he had assured just a few hours earlier that he was ready to go to prison and death with.

Imagine how devastated Peter must have felt as the realization of what he had said and what he had done or rather, not done, crashes down on him. He leaves the courtyard and weeps bitterly.

I read somewhere that the penalty of sin is to face, not the anger of Jesus, but the heartbreak in his eyes. And most commentators that I read on this narrative suggested just that; that Jesus looked on Peter in sorrow or grief.

But that doesn't fit in with the Jesus I know. This is the Jesus who has and will use Peter's many faults, including his three denials, to turn him from Simon, a common man with a common name, into Peter, the Rock. The rock upon which Jesus' church will be founded.

I see the look Jesus gives Peter as a look of love. We learnt earlier this year in our 1 Corinthians series that loveis not irritable or resentful.... bears all things and endures all things.... and that love never ends. In response to the deaths in the Twin Towers I think our Queen Elizabeth got it right when she said “Grief is the price you pay for love”.

Yes, Peter was filled with grief, but Jesus's love was ever present.

In 2 Corinthians it says that in Christ, all things become new and I see the rooster as symbolically proclaiming the start of a new day; a day which marks the beginning of Jesus' rescue of Peter from his devastated feeling of despair and failure and which is completed on the lake shore shortly before Jesus' ascension.

I'm not sure where I see myself in this story. In all probability I would have legged it like the 10 or perhaps taken my time to get to the courtyard like Ron would have advised.

I would like to think I love Jesus as John did and would hide nearby. I don't want to see myself as Peter...but the truth is we can all deny Christ by our thoughts, actions and words. Peter's story is our story and I think he allowed his story to become well known to carry out just what Jesus said "strengthen your brothers". If Peter can fail and still be included – I can too.

I've often wondered if or when Peter remembered the words Jesus said to him in verse 32 of our first reading "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers".

Those words, said just a few hours before his arrest, attest to the fact that Jesus had faith in Peter, but perhaps not in the way Peter understood. His feelings of shame, failure and disloyalty will be healed and Peter will be restored to become the bold and steadfast leader we read about in Acts. When it will be down to his strength of character to strengthen his brothers in the adversity which awaits them.

In his own way I think Peter genuinely thought he could save Jesus, but the truth of the matter is the reverse; it is Jesus who saves us. And the look which causes Peter to leave the courtyard in tears is in reality a look of forgiveness and love. A look which makes the risen Jesus' first words to his apostles in that locked room make sense "Peace be with you". No recriminations, no anger..... just...peace be with you.

The peace which Jesus restores to Peter on the lake shore; which is where I will end and Jon, next week, will resume.