

'Essential support for students in free-fall!'

A sermon for St Peter's Patronal Sunday 2018

by Mark Pilgrim

'Grade 1'. 'A star'. '1st Class Honours'. No matter what method of marking you use, Peter got it right. 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' says Peter in answer to Jesus' question in Matthew's Gospel: 'Who do you say I am?'

You can almost hear the angels in heaven whoop and holler! 'Yeah! Peter got it right! Hooray!' Cue a huge round of applause! Jesus' number 1 disciple understands who Jesus is and confesses it aloud. Grade 1! A star! 1st Class!

But how long does Peter's moment in the sun last? Not that long at all! Because the very next thing Matthew reports is Jesus telling Peter off with the words 'Get behind me, Satan!'

Peter's marks go from A star to Unclassified in the blink of an eye! If this free-fall descent happened in our education system, we would probably expect some form of support to be available. If we were the teachers we might say: Clearly the student showed promise! Let's not allow that promise to disappear into the sand. Let's provide support so the student can eventually be an A* student once again.

Does it happen with Peter? Yes, it does.

Does it take a long time for that support to kick in and be effective? Yes, it does.

Does Peter continue to make mistakes even when he's confessed Jesus as Lord faithfully and publicly later? Yes, he does!

Are we a bit like Peter in this respect – struggling to understand fully the depth and breadth of God in Jesus and tripping up when given the opportunity to confess Jesus as Lord with our words or our deeds? Let's shout it out together! **'YES, WE ARE!'**

But, friends, there is hope! God supported Peter: and God supports us. Peter lived in challenging times, when the pressure to go with the culture of the time and deny that Jesus is God Incarnate was massive. To go against either the Roman or the Jewish culture of the time on this matter was truly life threatening. Jesus lost his life for it – as Christians have continued to lose their lives for it down the ages, including into our own times. The challenge to confess Jesus as Lord, as Peter did now successfully, now falteringly, continues for us today.

Like Peter, we need help in responding to those challenges. We need support to confess Jesus is the Son of the living God – when the pressure to go with the flow and not make following Christ a life and death issue is so immense.

And my message to you this morning, friends, is that that help is at hand. God gave that help to Peter through the work of the Holy Spirit. And God has given that help through the ages – and gives that support to us today...as we pray and invite the Holy Spirit to work in, around and beyond us, now and into the future.

A picture of God's supportive Spirit at work is at hand in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here we see the writer, Luke, continue to teach those with ears to hear and eyes to see something of vital significance to Christians of all times and all ages: that God's Holy Spirit is at work empowering ordinary

but faithful people to be 'disciples-like-Jesus'. He does so by inviting his readers to draw absorbing comparisons between what happens to ordinary people in the Acts of the Apostles and what happens to Jesus in the Gospels. Let's take a look at our passage from Acts.

Acts 12 verse 2 says bluntly 'Herod had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword'. While a violent death isn't the only option open to a disciple of Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised that it does occur. Because Luke chapter 9 verse 24, sees Jesus saying 'Those who lose their life for my sake will save it.'

Moving on to the account of Peter finding new life after being locked up or, you might say, 'entombed' in a highly secured prison – but brought back to life by the activity of God's Spirit, we can ask 'What parallels are there between this record in Acts and other events in the Gospels?'

In Acts 12 the arrest of a Christian leader pleases the Jewish authorities. It happens at the Feast of Passover. He is kept under the guard of the secular authorities. In the midst of this incarceration, at the darkest time of the leader's ordeal, God acts. Light shines. The Christian leader's chains fall off. Miraculously he passes through Roman guards, experiencing liberation from entombment and new life. It's all like waking from a dream – like waking after being asleep in a nightmare. What happens next?

The first person the Christian leader encounters is a woman. The woman goes to tell other followers that the Christian leader is alive, free and wanting to meet them again. The other followers (implicitly, all men) don't believe this witness at first – but soon the Christian leader appears among them...but then moves off and goes to 'another place'. What passage in Luke's gospel does Peter being released from prison remind you of? Let's say it together!

'The Resurrection!'

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles Luke is saying 'The Holy Spirit is at work empowering frail people to be disciples-like-Jesus, following Christ both in mission and to martyrdom'. How many times do we see this happening in the Acts of the Apostles? First to Stephen, then to Philip, now to James and Peter, later to Paul: here there's Rhoda – later there's Lydia. The list of people like you and me who are empowered to follow Jesus in all sorts of ways is impressive. And the key to them being, each in their own way, a 'disciple-like-Jesus' is their openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. In their vulnerability they have to make themselves vulnerable to God's Holy Spirit at work in, around and beyond them.

Notice how, when Peter experiences his resurrection-like liberation from prison, he isn't entirely alone. God's Spirit comes to him externally, in the form of an angel, yes...but he also has support from fellow Christians and is being prayed for fervently by them. The support of God's Spirit comes, as I say, in all sorts of ways – from within, around and beyond us.

As we face the challenge of confessing Christ as Lord in our own culture and respond, like Peter perhaps, privately successfully and publicly falteringly, we too have support coming to us from God's Spirit within, around and beyond us.

As it happens, just last week at our 4.00pm Horizon service, as part of our series on the Acts of the Apostles, we had this exact same passage about Peter's escape to focus on. In thinking of examples of how God supports us in answering prayer, I offered two instances that I believe fit the bill for St Peter's as a whole. Back in 2008 we began to pray for God to bless and direct the development of our youth work. In my own mind I - and probably many, if not all those, praying – wanted and expected our internal church youth work to blossom and grow. What actually happened was that, in God's good provision, I believe,

ways were found to start our community youth work first. We have kept praying for continuing guidance in the development of our youth work – and Simon Collins appeared among us in 2017, enabling St Peter's youth work to develop in the way that we expected way back in 2009! God's priorities and our priorities are often very different: but God's support is constant – in, around and beyond us.

The HeartEdge Workshop that we hosted here just less than two weeks ago offers another example of God's support attending us. As you can read in this month's Newslink, ministers and members of other churches supported us by asking searching questions. 'Given the breadth and quantity of all that St Peter's is doing, would there be value in, is there a need a simplification of activity into a smaller number of priorities?' They went on to ask: 'Given all the things that people are involved in, what is it that only St Peter's can do? Might it be that it is what only St Peter's can do that God is calling us to concentrate on in order to be distinctively Christian in our culture? Would doing and concentrating on these 'unique to St Peter's' activities be a way in which we could get nearer to our patron saint's Grade 1, A*, 1st class honours confession 'You, Lord, are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'?

This gentle prodding, this support and reflection from critical friends is, I believe, the activity of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We are not alone. God is communicating with and supporting us through these Christian friends. Our task is to be open to their insights and to reflect, prayerfully, on what adjustments we can make to our confession of Christ in word and deed so as to be effective in doing God's will and building God's kingdom. This is what the would-be 'disciples like Jesus' Peter, Rhoda, Paul and Lydia did before us. This is what we, 'disciples-like-Jesus' in the 21st century, are called to do today.

So, let's take heart. Let's recognise that we, like Peter, may be A* disciples in theory – able to answer Jesus' question 'Who do you say I am?' with Peter's Grade 1 answer 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' in private, in the quiet of our night time prayer. Let's confess that we, like Peter, sometimes sink to the bottom of the class when it comes to living out our Christian faith in the world. But let's then also, like Pete, be ready to learn from our mistakes. Let's be like Peter in being prepared to go in the opposite direction to what we thought was right, if that is the way God leads us. And let us, like Peter, look to God's Holy Spirit to act in, around and beyond us. Be confident, friends: God's Spirit is empowering us to be 'disciples-like-Jesus' in our own day, as that same Spirit empowered our patron saint Peter in ways that are recorded throughout the new Testament.

Let us pray:

Eternal God, may we, like Peter, find the Holy Spirit supporting us as we strive – now successfully, now falteringly – to confess Jesus as Lord both in what we say and what we do. Amen.