

“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.” Luke 22:61-62

This is one of the few silent moments in a night
filled with shouting and lying and noise.

One of the night's most significant events comes
when two men suddenly look at each other in silence.
The hour is probably close to dawn
and it is at the end of a long and bitter night
when people are struggling and plotting to get rid of their God.

And here are two men: One is only ten hours away from death. . .
and the other has just told a group of people around a fire
that he doesn't know the man who is going to die.
“No, no, I don't know him. I have never been with him.
I swear I haven't.” Just then a rooster crows to greet the dawn.

The prisoner, apparently being led from one room of the palace to another,
passes through the yard where the fire is. . .
and looks at the man standing beside it.
Suddenly the gate slams and out into the cold dawn
flees the man who had been so loud just a moment earlier.
He runs away and down the silent streets
trying to hide himself in a corner of the great city.
And as he runs, tears pour down his face—hot, bitter tears,
washing away something like dirt on his face and blood on his soul.

Just what happened in that strange look?
And what does this gripping scene have to do with us today?
Here at dawn, in one man looking at another, we catch a glimpse:
a revealing, terrifying and healing glimpse
of the true meaning of the Christian faith.

For, you see, this scene, almost more than any other in the Bible,
shows so clearly and forcefully that Christianity is, at its centre,
a living relationship with a living person.
Standing at the core of our faith is the intimate relationship
of a redeemed human soul to the redeeming person of Jesus Christ
in a bond of love and trust and obedience--
in all the ways in which one person is bound to another.

And that is the heart and soul of the faith we confess.
Nothing more. . .and nothing less.

More than 2000 years ago, a man—a living breathing man--
came riding into a city to die. A person—not an ideal or a philosophy,
not a system of thought or a religion or a doctrine,
but a man, rode in willingly, to die.

And five days later, as Peter is standing by the fire,
lying for the sake of safety, swearing for a moment of warmth,
his relationship of love and trust with that man is broken.
And when his master turns and looks at him,
Peter suddenly realizes what he has done,
suddenly saw what he has thrown away,
suddenly knows what he has forgotten. . .
and there is nothing left for him to do
but to stumble out into the darkness,
blinded by the burning tears and run—afraid and alone--

until another dawn a few weeks later by the lake
when and where he again hears the voice of his Saviour
speaking to him in a healing and warm voice and asking him,
“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

It is time for us now to bring the story down into the 21st century.
Certainly all of us, if we are honest with ourselves and with God
would have to say: “I have done the same sort of thing.
Oh, maybe I haven't done it publicly or quite so obviously,
but there have been times when I, too, have forgotten.

“I, too, have broken the bond between Christ and my soul.
I, too, have stood by the sputtering little fires
of my lust or my greed, my hate or my tongue,
my envy or my dislike of another.
I, too, have sometimes acted as if
I have had never heard of or belonged to Christ.”

Look! We've all been caught in that same situation--
in the position of wanting to be accepted
or liked or admired by an individual, a group or a crowd,
and the break always and inevitably comes.

And when it comes, no matter how much we try and defend it,
there is no way we can fool ourselves and deny it.

We know instinctively that we have broken the relationship
and that we were. . .and are. . .wrong.

And that knowledge of our guilt—that knowing we are wrong--
that is part of the look of the Lord that comes to Peter.

And although sometimes it may be long in coming;
although sometimes there may be years of seemingly getting by. . .
nevertheless, all of us know that the look of the Lord
eventually comes--to try and turn us around. . .
to get us to admit that we are wrong
and that something has to change. . .to change inside us.

But the look of the Lord is more than just that. . .
because if it only judged or condemned us,
none of us would be here this morning.
We need more than just more guilt.
And so it is important for us to try and understand this:
What is there in that look of Jesus that brings Peter's world
crashing down about his ears. . .that sends him out into the night in tears?

Was it anger at Peter? No! People who are scolded
don't go out into the darkness heartbroken.
Was it rejection or disappointment then? I don't think so.
After all, Jesus had predicted what would happen.
He knew Peter well enough to know how he would react
when the chips were down.

No! Instead, the one great crushing power in that look,
the elemental force that drives Peter out into the night,
the one thing that would remain with him
in all those long and lonely years
of wandering around the Mediterranean--
the one great power which would lift him up,
keep him going and drive him on is a look of understanding love.

It is only a glance. . .but in that glance are all the memories of companionship,
and all the endless, gentle tenderness of the Shepherd
for one of his sheep who has lost the way home.
“And Peter went out and wept bitterly.”
And using those tears as ink, an angel writes down Peter's name
to stand forever among those whom love had brought home again.

And that is the gospel of Christ put in its simplest and plainest form.

The gospel is understanding, acceptance and forgiveness.

In Jesus' look at Peter is the greatness of our faith and the power of it,
for in that look is the message of a second chance,
the message and promise of a fresh start,
the message of the voice of the Christ saying:
“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”

During the last week of this Lenten season—this great and holy week--
as you look upon the one who hangs on that cross before you. . .
and you see his eyes searching and seeking you out,
meeting. . .and then holding your your gaze;

when you look upon him in your heart and your mind. . .
and you mind recalls all the ways you have denied him
or betrayed him or failed him. . .and your eyes flash with tears--
not tears of joy and love but tears of guilt and shame and regret:

when that happens, don't look away. . .don't stop looking. . .
because the eyes that look inside you don't hold
judgement or condemnation or hatred of you.
Instead, those eyes of that person you want so much to love
but are afraid to let yourself love--those eyes are filled with
understanding, with acceptance, with forgiveness, and with love. . .for you.

And that look which you think is meant to make you
feel guilt-ridden and shame-filled, that look really says:
“I understand. I know all about it and I forgive you for it.”
“I’m going not to stop loving you. . .no matter what!”

There is an old tradition in the Christian church which tells us
that the story of Peter has a happy ending.

Now, it may be true or it may be completely legendary,
but it is important. . .and it has a certain justice to it.

On July 19, in the year of our Lord 64,
thirty years after this night we have looked at,
a fire broke out in the Rome and half the city was destroyed.
The Emperor Nero needed a scapegoat
and the Christians were close at hand.

According to the story, hundreds died by fire and the sword,
 and among them was Peter. He was sentenced to die by crucifixion--
 but at his own request was crucified upside down
 because he didn't consider himself worthy of dying
 in the same manner his Lord had died.

Here then the story ends. On a hot July morning,
 an old man is hanging upside down in a Roman arena.
 If he opened his eyes, he would see the bloody red sand
 from which the Church would grow in the years to come.
 But when he closed his eyes as I am sure he did:
 When he closed them in that moment of awareness
 and remembering that always comes to dying people--
 then I am sure he saw something else, too.

He would remember many things in his own life,
 but surely, above all, he must have seen and remembered
 that cold, bitter dawn so many years before
 when he had looked into the eyes of the one who understood him. . .
 and who loved him completely and would love him forever.

He must have remembered the power in that look:
 the power that drove him out into the night
 to come at long last to this ridiculous position
 with the world upside down
 and tears of pain in his eyes once again.

Only this time there was something else. . .something more.
 This time he was waiting—waiting for the moment
 when his Master would come again to tell him
 that he had done well. . .that he had fought the fight,
 that he had kept the faith.

And I am sure he knew in that bloody arena,
 just as he knew on that dawn by the lake,
 that now there would be no more night and no more tears. . .
 and he was, I am sure, very content and very happy.

Amen. SDG