

this time Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, as a result of which, John records, “many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him” (11:45).

Passing through Samaria he healed ten lepers, and the only one to come back and thank him was a Samaritan. Coming to Jericho, he gave sight to a blind beggar, and “the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God” (Lk. 18:43). Jesus showed his lack of partiality when he dined with Zacchaeus, the chief among the publicans, and “all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner” (19:7). Luke then records (19:28) that he “went before, ascending up to Jerusalem”. The last week of the Lord’s life was spent in Jerusalem and Bethany.

He commuted into Jerusalem from the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and on one occasion he cast out those who sold and bought in the temple, teaching as he did so. The Jews were unable to touch him, “for they feared him, because all the people was astonished at his doctrine” (Mk. 11:15-19). On another occasion, “as he was walking in the temple” (v. 27), the Jews questioned him, and Jesus took the opportunity to speak parables and answer their trick questions (Mark 12). Matthew 23 records how Jesus denounced the scribes and

Pharisees in the audience of the people and the disciples (v. 1). Seated on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave his disciples the signs of his coming and of the end of the age, and also parables about the judgement to come (Mt. 24–25). The public preaching ended here, although the Last Supper and Christ’s discourses to the disciples in the upper room and Garden of Gethsemane (Jno. 13–17) are full of wonderful teaching.

Conclusion

In three years the Lord Jesus taught whenever opportunities arose. He did not “compass sea and land to make one proselyte” (Mt. 23:15), but preached in his own country and to his neighbours. He travelled more than once through many places. He preached by word, deed and example. The places he preached were wherever people could be found. The Gospels record him preaching in homes, in the country, in synagogues, in the temple, by the seaside, walking along the way, resting himself, sitting on mountains and hillsides, at mealtimes, sitting in a boat and at a wedding. We cannot yet do his mighty works, but may the Truth be so dominant in our lives that we live it always, and preach, as he did, at every opportunity.

Peter: fisher of men

Stephen Palmer

Peter was a sinner, but he learned during the ministry of Christ how to bring others to an understanding of the gospel. A series of chapters in Matthew particularly focuses on Peter, bringing out several lessons, such as the need for faith when preaching, the importance of understanding parables and how each disciple must take up his cross. The theme of making disciples and feeding the sheep is given more emphasis in the record concerning Peter than the preaching of the gospel.

ONCE THE LORD has called Peter to be a ‘fisher of men’, the Sea of Galilee and the events on and around it take on a new significance, like a grand parable, in the inspired narrative. The sea itself becomes the reservoir of potential converts, the net is the gospel preached, the many sorts of fish the great diversity of peoples embraced by that net. The ship is the ecclesia, sometimes tossed with tempest and in danger of

being swamped; the Lord walking on water is demonstrating the power of God vested in him to rule over many peoples, nations and tongues, and to bring the ecclesia to a peaceful haven.

So what is the significance in Luke’s inspired record of the details surrounding the call to fish men? Luke tells of the Lord in the boat with Peter: “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.

And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the

draught of the fishes which they had taken: and so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men" (5:5-10).

But clearly there were some problems. Peter was a self-confessed sinful man (v. 8), the nets were not that strong and the boats not sturdy enough to hold such a catch safely (v. 7). But after the death and resurrection of the Lord the inspired record of John records another great catch of fish—153 great fish—this time too many to haul into the boat, and yet the net towed to shore did not break, and Peter girded in his fisher's coat hauled the catch onto the sand all on his own (21:1-11). During the ministry of Jesus, Peter was being trained to know how to encompass men in the net of understanding, and Peter himself was clothed with forgiveness and strengthened to be the pioneer that would haul in the first catch of disciples through the waters of baptism.

The first disciple

Peter the disciple, a devout adherent to the Law of Moses, was born out of the preaching of John the Baptist and the waters of Jordan, and found himself through an independence of character, openness and honesty (and therefore sometimes hasty in word and action) as the spokesman and de facto leader of the closest of the Lord's companions. In the Gospel records Peter is thrust forward, perhaps reluctantly on his behalf, as the first of all the disciples (see Matthew 10:2), a model to study, an exposition of discipleship to encourage all would-be disciples, manifesting both huge strengths and fatal weaknesses, undoubtedly sincere love for the Master and yet falling short because of the universal weakness of the flesh; but in the end a true disciple, recovered and redeemed by the grace and love of the Lord.

Given the hugely selective nature of the events recorded through the Spirit in the Gospel records, the prominence of Peter and the implicit lessons provided for us attracts intense interest. For example, each chapter from Matthew 14 to 19 comprises a sequence of events in which Peter is the key actor.

Matthew 14

In Matthew 14 there is the storm on Galilee and the Lord walking on the water. Peter's astonishing devotion to his Master leads him to say, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water" (v. 28), and indeed he did step over the side and he

did walk on water. But when he sees the strength of the wind, and the waves mounting, he is afraid, and beginning to sink he cries, "Lord, save me". Having caught him by the hand, Christ says, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (vv. 30,31). Here was a lesson in faith which also taught that the Lord would stretch out his hands to his disciples in their time of need. In the preaching of the gospel in the raging seas of nations, loyalty to Christ and faithful intention would not be enough. The presence of the power of Christ would be an essential lifeline to survive the storms of circumstance. Disciples who preached would always need to look unto Jesus rather than to their own ingenuity and natural reserves.

Matthew 15

In Matthew 15 a debate arises with the Pharisees and scribes over the traditions of the elders. Jesus says, "they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (v. 14). Obvious enough we might think, but not for Peter at this stage: "Declare unto us this parable" (v. 15). The answer, not a commendation for seeking, but a reproof for slowness of uptake: "Are ye also yet without understanding?" (v. 16). Even a Gentile woman seemed to have a better grasp than a Jewish man who had followed Jesus throughout his ministry. She at least was able to enter into the wordplay of the Master: "yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27); but Peter and the other eleven really did need their eyes to be opened if they were to be agents of the gospel message.

Matthew 16

Then, in Matthew 16, came the great declaration at Caesarea Philippi: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Certainly in this respect Peter could see very clearly indeed. The Father in heaven had revealed it. Had Peter heard these words from heaven at the baptism of Jesus, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17)? Certainly everything the Lord subsequently did in miracle and wonder confirmed for Peter that heaven-sent revelation.

Peter's great declaration was made at a place renowned in the Greco-Roman world as a centre of worship for Pan and other deities. Alcoves in the great cliff-face bear witness to the places of veneration of images. The expansive cave mouth of Pan's grotto was thought to be the entrance to the underworld, the "Gates of Hades". Far from taking the disciples to a quiet backwater, the Lord

had brought them to a gaudy microcosm of the world they had to conquer, a society of powerful superstition and political hostility. And Peter's declaration had captured the heart of the matter. He had rightly contrasted the gods of Greece with the "Living God", the Rock of Moses (Deut. 32:4) and David (Ps. 62:2), Who had sent His Son. And though the great rock-face festooned with images presented a daunting picture, the Lord assures Peter that Greco-Roman culture and superstition would be no match for the gospel they preached. And Peter was to be given responsibility for the keys that promised an entrance, not into the underworld of a society dead in sins, but into the Kingdom of heaven itself. Peter himself would be the first stone to be placed on the new foundation, the beginning of a temple unlike any that lay in their view.

And yet even Peter's great strength of conviction would not be sufficient in itself. Another vital lesson had to be learned. Jesus must first suffer many things, as he said, "and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Mt. 16:21). But Peter's understanding was again lacking. The concept of "pity thyself" (v. 22, AV mg.) was a barrier to both: "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me" (v. 23). The essential truth was this: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (v. 24). Amazing as it appears, this was the vital ingredient of the gospel that would turn the world upside down.

Matthew 17

And only then would come the glory. Peter, with James and John, was privileged to see the "Son of man coming in his kingdom" (16:28) on the mount of transfiguration. He saw the Lord's face shining as the sun ("with healing in his wings") and his raiment white as light. He would hear the Voice first heard at Jordan reiterate the stunning words from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (17:5). But there was more to be heard, extra words which would command Peter's attention always: "hear ye him". The man who so often spoke too quickly had to learn that discipleship first and foremost is a listening to and learning from the Teacher.

Many years later Peter explained the significance of that transfiguration scene. He calls it "the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:16). They had been "eyewitnesses of his majesty". The voice from heaven had communicated "honour and glory" (v. 17) to the Son.

What Peter had witnessed, though a secret at the time, was to be fundamental to his own work. In his Second Epistle he lays before the believer the hope of sharing "the divine nature" (1:4), being called "to glory and virtue" (v. 3). The power that would transform a disciple's character into fruitfulness is seeing clearly the glory of the everlasting Kingdom "afar off" (v. 9).

As the narrative of Matthew's Gospel continues, Peter is still the named disciple at the forefront of the lessons the Lord is teaching. Temple tax collectors approach Peter with the challenge, "Doth not your master pay tribute?" (17:24). Peter's instinctively loyal defence was an opportunity for another lesson. "What thinkest thou, Simon?" (v. 25). Did Jesus really need to pay a tax to the temple authorities, since he was the Son over the house of God? Peter knew he was the Son, he had declared it in Caesarea Philippi and heard it echo from heaven on the mount of transfiguration. So should Peter have so readily answered the challenge in the way he did? Was it not conceding the authority to unworthy servants when in truth all authority lay with the Son? The children are free, and should be free of temple rituals and traditions. The Lord through the gospel preached would build the new house, not made with hands. Nevertheless, now was not the time to create a scene (v. 27), and Peter was told to catch a fish in whose mouth was one coin, exactly the value required for the two of them. The lesson was there for the son of Jonah to contemplate; redemption was to come out of the mouth of a fish. Was Peter, in this strange miracle, intended to see himself as the fish? The Lord had told him to "take up the fish that *first* cometh up" (v. 27). The same word is used of Peter, "the first, Simon" (10:2). Out of Simon's mouth would come redemption that is in Christ; one coin, one price, for "me and thee" (17:27).

Matthew 18

In Matthew 18 there is yet another lesson. "How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?", asks Peter (v. 21). The Lord had, through the record, linked the price of Peter's redemption to his own, had linked his own cross to Peter's, and now in this incident links Peter's forgiveness to that which Peter is willing to show to others. The context is of giving and taking offence, and of searching for those who have stumbled and gone astray. Our forgiveness is contingent on showing a genuinely forgiving spirit. If we are not prepared to forgive a small debt owed to us,

how can the Father forgive us the incalculable debt we owe Him?

Matthew 19

In Matthew 19 Peter once again is the spokesman for the twelve and asking the almost impertinent question, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (v. 27). So gently, the Lord responds to the genuineness of the statement and not to the crude self-interest of the twelve. He answers that they would sit on the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes in the Kingdom; but be careful, those who put themselves first may find themselves last (v. 30).

There is a progression of thought in the Peter-focused sequence of incidents recounted in Matthew's record. First, there is the basic need for faith in Christ in times of adversity, then the need for continuing growth of spiritual insight based on the belief in the Son of the living God. But there must also be an appreciation that the way of the cross precedes the glory of the Kingdom. And finally, never forget that discipleship is dependent upon God's forgiveness through Christ, and following in that way means forgiving others ourselves. Such Christlike self-sacrifice has the assurance of everlasting life. A theme throughout all this is noteworthy, the emphasis on Peter seeing Christ. Lose sight of him and you begin to sink, get in front and you cannot follow, but see the glory of Christ clearly and you have full assurance of hope. Had Peter known he was in line of sight and hearing distance of the Master in the house of the high priest then surely he would not have disowned his allegiance as vehemently as he did.

Making disciples!

So does all this seem rather surprising and little to do with the task first enunciated: to become a fisher of men? How little there seems to be in the Gospels about the commission to preach and how to preach! And yet what was the purpose of the preaching that Peter and the others would do? In the Matthew record the disciples are told, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy [Spirit]: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (28:19,20). Rotherham's translation has, instead of "teach all nations", "disciple all the nations". The word for *teach* is the word for *disciple*. So that was the task: not so much to preach a message as to make disciples; and there-

fore the nature of true discipleship had first to be learned.

The development of Peter and the others through the Gospel narratives emphasises the making of disciples rather than the preaching of a message, bringing others to see and follow the Master rather than merely to gain an intellectual grasp of his doctrines. It is a remarkable thing that, at the final scene in the Gospels on the shores of Galilee at the end of John's record, set against the fishing expedition of the disciples, there is no mention of fishing for people, even though the echoes of their first calling from the fishing boats of Galilee bring that promise to mind. Rather, the metaphor of fishing is replaced by the metaphor of a shepherd: feed my lambs, shepherd my sheep, feed my sheep (Jno. 21:15-17). Peter was given keys to open doors into a safe sheepfold for disciples.

The perhaps surprising emphasis in the record on shepherding rather than fishing provides a perspective on preaching which warns us against thinking of preaching as a standalone activity, of preaching for its own sake, or of baptizing a man or woman with no reference to a nearby ecclesia, essential to provide the fellowship of support that defines the community that new disciples should be called to embrace.

And this sets the context for the Acts of the Apostles. The threefold injunction in John 21 does appear to describe three phases of Peter's ministry. First he fed the lambs, the administering of the milk of the Word to young disciples (Acts 1-4). Then he shepherded the sheep, protecting the ecclesia from early corrupting influences and establishing a welfare system for needy sisters (Acts 5-6). This is followed by continuing to feed the more mature ecclesia on pastoral visits (Acts 9) and with Pastoral Epistles.

The keys

Peter used his first key to unlock the door to the Kingdom at Pentecost, by which time the disciples were already united "with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1). This ecclesial community was the platform for preaching. It was the pillar and stay of the Truth, where suffering for the gospel's sake was a shared experience, providing comfort, companionship and prayer for its members. And once caught in the gospel net the new disciples are immediately embraced by the ecclesia: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued

stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers . . . And all that believed were together, and had all things common" (2:41,42,44).

The second key was used to unlock the door of faith to the Gentiles, for many in the Jewish ecclesia a step too far! Wisely, Peter took a good number of witnesses with him and so commanded Cornelius and his household to be baptized. And if that was all that was entailed in preaching the gospel Peter might have happily left that household to fend for itself under the good hand of God. And yet the whole controversy it engendered was not about whether a Gentile could believe or even be baptized (no man could forbid that once heaven had spoken), but it was about whether Gentiles could be embraced into the company of disciples that made up the fellowship of the ecclesia. "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them" (11:3). But since even an angel had shared fellowship in the house of the Gentiles—"he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house" (v. 13)—how could Jewish brethren object?

The net

The gospel net itself does deserve closer attention. How did Peter catch disciples? In Acts 2 the inspired apostle proves, by closely reasoned argument from Scripture, that Jesus of Nazareth whom they crucified had risen from the dead according to the Scriptures and was now Lord and Christ. A visual aid did of course help the force of logic—or rather two visual aids, the tomb of David still intact, and the other but empty tomb.

We are only given a summary in Acts 2: "And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (v. 40). The reasoning from Scripture (Joel 2, Psalm 16, Psalm 132 and Psalm 110) had pricked the hearts of thousands and brought them to a state of repentance, and then Peter unlocked the door of baptism into the apostles' fellowship. Had Peter ever before caught a shoal of 3,000 fish in one cast?

The Spirit-gifted apostles continued to witness through miracle and word to the resurrection and ascension of Christ. The message again was reinforced; these things had been spoken of in the Hebrew scriptures: ". . . which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (3:21). In the short passage from 3:18-25 the "prophets" are mentioned six times; Moses of course, but also "all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days" (v. 24). Jesus of Nazareth was the seed promised to Abraham who would bring a blessing on all families of the earth.

Here, then, is guidance on the content of our preaching, a clear exposition of the covenants of promise, of the blessing of forgiveness promised to Abraham, of hope of the Kingdom promised to David and now made possible through the crucified and resurrected Christ, an ark into which they could enter through baptism. Peter did not invent this himself. He simply and faithfully transmitted what he had been taught: "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (4:20).

The ministers and clergy of the present day believe that they preach the gospel in setting before the people the death of Christ. The death of Christ, in its sacrificial import, doubtless becomes an element in the apostolic testimony of the gospel; but, in considering whether this was the whole gospel of first century preaching, we must remember that Christ and his disciples preached the gospel *three years before the crucifixion*. Not only so, but we have evidence that the apostles, while so engaged—while they "went throughout the towns, preaching the gospel"—(Luke ix. 6), *were not aware that Christ had to suffer*. Christ frequently told his disciples that he should "suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests, and scribes, and be slain, and be raised again the third day" (Luke ix. 22); but it is said, "*they understood not this saying, and it was hid from them that they perceived it not*" (Luke ix. 45). The fact that, while in this state of ignorance concerning the sufferings of Christ, they "preached the gospel", is proof of the most positive character that the gospel, as preached by them, must have been something very different from the gospel of modern times, which consists *exclusively* of the death of Christ on the cross. The difference is manifest in the foregoing testimonies, which tell us they preached "THE KINGDOM OF GOD".

Robert Roberts, *Christendom Astray*, pp. 142-3