

## **“Peter: ‘On This Rock I Will Build My Church’”**

16 May 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

### **Welcome & Call To Worship**

**Hymn of Preparation:** This Is Amazing Grace

### **Prayers of Adoration & Confession**

**Reading:** Acts 9:32-43

### **Sermon (Part I):**

Luke’s focus has shifted to Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ and the acts of Peter. Peter’s name means rock, and he is the one upon whom Jesus will build His church and to whom Jesus has given the *“keys of the Kingdom”* (admittedly Luke doesn’t tell us that, but Matthew does in 16:18-19). Some of you may be unfamiliar with Peter’s biography. He was called Simon, a fisherman and brother of another apostle called Andrew, who heard the call of Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee to stop fishing for fish and become *“fishers of men”*. He was the leader, quick with his opinions and the first disciple to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah; though he was a natural and promising leader, he failed Jesus terribly by denying he knew or was associated with Him at the time of His arrest and crucifixion. Peter cried many tears over his betrayal of Jesus and his abject failure, yet he was wonderfully restored by Jesus on those same shores of the Sea of Galilee after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. He wrote in a letter, *“and the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast”* (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:10). Peter became the rock of the Church by the grace of God alone in Jesus Christ.

We are given a snapshot in the Acts of the Apostles of how Peter was used by God to establish the Church of Jesus Christ, to be the rock and to unlock the door, first for the Jews and then for the Gentiles. In Acts 2 when he preached the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem, 3000 people were saved and added to the Church, establishing it there; now in chapters 9 and 10, we see the preparation God makes to enable Peter to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and establish the Church, so that it can move forward in mission to the world.

### **I. Peter the Apostle (9:32-43)**

Many of the Jews hated the Church and a campaign of intense persecution scattered the Christians to the surrounding districts of Judea, Galilee and Samaria. One of the drivers of this was Saul, but now that he has been wonderfully saved, humbled and captivated by Jesus, the pressure on the Church has eased (9:31). They enjoyed a period of peace; therefore, Peter is able to travel outside of Jerusalem and visit the churches that have been established. He has travelled towards Joppa, the port city, and on the way he has called in with the church in Lydda. (The church members are called *“the saints”* because they are declared righteous and holy through their faith in the Lord Jesus, who was righteous and holy).

Luke recounts two miraculous events. In Lydda, Aeneas, who was paralysed and confined to bed for the last eight years, is healed and walks again; in Joppa, Tabitha (Dorcas) died and was raised to life. Apostles like Peter can perform authenticating signs: *“the things that mark*

*an apostle - signs, wonders, and miracles were done among you with great perseverance*" (2 Corinthians 12:12). These signs authenticate Peter as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Peter was part of Jesus inner circle of disciples, which included James and John, and he has seen Jesus heal a paralytic man (which Luke tells us about in 5:17-26) and raise a girl, the daughter of a man called Jairus, from the dead (which again Luke recounts to us in 8:41-56). The similarity of the miracles Peter performs to those of Jesus are unmistakable. Peter performs his miracles only in the power of Jesus' name and through submitting to Jesus in prayer. He knows he has no miraculous powers apart from Jesus Christ. Note how Peter tells both Aeneas and Tabitha to "get up" (v.34; v.40), literally to rise. As John Stott summarises, Peter acted in a similar manner to Jesus, with the power of Jesus, bringing the salvation of Jesus and for the glory of Jesus. These miraculous signs were signs of the wonder and power of salvation found in Jesus and they pointed to Jesus because in both towns "all", which must mean many, believed in Jesus, they turned to the Lord. Both Aeneas's healing and Tabitha's temporary rising from the dead were authenticating signs of the gospel and the ministry of Peter as an Apostle.

This is the hope we have in Christ through the gospel and power of Him in our lives; it is the promise of God for all who believe and is authenticated by these miracles. *"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning, or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"* (Revelation 21:3-4). The gospel is the hope of life now and the hope of life for eternity. Peter the Apostle was sent by Jesus to proclaim and authenticate that message.

**Reading:** Acts 10:1-48

### **Sermon (Part II):**

What a week it has been! The verdict on the fatal shooting of ten unarmed civilians in Ballymurphy, Belfast has highlighted the hatred between Nationalist and Irish loyalties, and Unionist and British loyalties. We have also witnessed the hatred between Jews and Arabs in Israel. That takes us to the root of the context for the heart work that God continued to perform in Peter's life.

Acts 10 has had a huge influence on me in my journey from Ballycastle, Co. Antrim to Fermoy in Co. Cork and now to Dublin. But what is more important is the extent to which God has worked in my heart. The verse that captivated me on that journey which began in 1997, *24 years ago*, was a truth that Peter also had to grasp: *"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right."*

The tragedy in Northern Ireland and in Israel is that the doctrine of election has been twisted into one of favouritism. We experience the blessing of God, which is totally underserved, we experience grace, but we fail to show grace. God chose Abraham to be a blessing to the nations, God chose Peter to be a blessing to the world, and he is about to find out the extent of that grace. God chose us to bless others. So let us look at the work God does in Peter.

## **II. God Takes The Initiative**

### **A. Peter's heart is changed (v.1-23a)**

Cornelius is described as a religious, God-fearing man, who has led his family into devout religious practice that was deeply sincere and practical. We also know from 11:2 that he was not a Jew and had not been circumcised. Many people will think Cornelius was good enough for God, and the question is, "In what way did God accept him? Does 'accept' mean 'justified'? Or does 'accept' mean that God, through Peter, offered him knowledge of the only way to be justified through faith in the work of Jesus Christ?" I believe there is no doubt that Cornelius, though good, religious and devout, still needed to respond by faith to the message of the gospel, confirmed by God's initiative in bringing Peter (the rock who held the keys of the kingdom) and Cornelius together, so that he would hear the gospel.

God takes the initiative and sends a messenger, an angel, to Cornelius. Cornelius is told to send to Joppa for Peter and, remarkably, who and where he is staying with (Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea). Cornelius obeys the word of God and sends two servants and a devout soldier to bring Peter to his house. God also takes the initiative with Peter. He is given a vision as he is waiting for food to be prepared. I was struck by the fact that Peter got hungry when he was trying to pray. Isn't that reassuring that he was human like us? As a man who must eat regularly, that brought a smile to my face. We are told the vision is of a sheet lowered from heaven with a mixture of animals in it - four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds. The Jews could only eat Kosher food and Peter was strict about obeying this. When he is told to kill and eat, he says (v.14), "*Surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.*" God also speaks a second time, and shows Peter the vision three times. He wants the message to be clear, repeated for emphasis so that Peter cannot ignore the message, and possibly because he was slow to accept what the message was saying to him.

Is that not often the case when we are told that what we have been doing, or the understanding we have about someone or some issue, is wrong, when God points out to us through His Word that His thoughts are not our thoughts or our ways? It can take us a long time to take it in and work out the implications. To resist God is, of course, wrong, but to process it with God and allow God to confirm His will to us is important. God is gentle, but He is persuasive and firm. Peter is reeling, wondering about the vision, or as the ESV translation more helpfully says, "*he was inwardly perplexed.*" God times the experience of Peter's vision with the arrival of the three messengers from Cornelius, who at that moment arrive at the door of Simon's house and ask for Peter. The repeated vision, the circumstantial coincidences, and then the Spirit clinches it by saying, "*Simon, three men are looking for you. So, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them for I have sent them*" (v.19-20).

For every church community, as for ARPC, today marks the beginning of a unique opportunity for change. As we meditate on this story, may its truths encourage all of us - elders, leaders, members - to have the courage to say, *God, please take the initiative. Give us Your thoughts, teach us Your ways, and help us know Your way and walk in it.* The building is empty, the people are scattered; let us see what God's vision is and then walk in that way.

## **B. Peter and Cornelius are brought together (v.23b-48)**

On our TV screens, we have seen Jews and Arabs fighting. The intensity of the hatred is palpable, the violence shocking, the distrust enormous. Jesus said it is out

of our hearts such evil comes; this is who we are. Our hearts must be changed. Peter is “sick” at the prospect of eating non-Kosher food, he has never visited the house of a Gentile unbeliever (v.28), but he is now within the house of Cornelius and he is there in obedience to the word of God, even if it is all new and strange to him. It is only God and His gospel that has the power and ability to radically change our hearts. There is lots to be learned from this experience; we have lots to learn, and even if we have come some way along the path, we have not yet fully died to self, hence our struggles and strife in relationships.

### **1. Equals**

Cornelius falls at Peter's feet in reverence, which Peter strongly resists. Note his instruction to Cornelius to “get up” in v.26. Why? Because “I am only a man.” The Jews thought of the Gentiles as dogs and John Stott succinctly comments, *“Peter refused both to be treated by Cornelius as a god and to treat Cornelius as a dog.”* Created equal, both sinful and in need of grace - God does not show favouritism. My old illustration of this was to ask, *does God love hockey players?* I was one, and in a Northern Irish context, it is always very telling to follow that question by asking, *does God love those who hurl?* You and I are not gods and we are not dogs; let us not act as if we are one or the other. Peter and Cornelius are equal in God's sight; there are no favourites.

### **2. Openness to listen to God**

Cornelius has invited his relatives and friends (v.24) and a large crowd has assembled (v.27). When Cornelius speaks, his words are gracious and welcoming; he, his friends and family recognise the significance of listening to God. Verse 33 is worth repeating in full: *“so I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”* In order to listen to God, we need to stop and concentrate, open our ears and hearts and allow the word of God to be heard. Are you listening to God? Cornelius was.

### **3. Centred in Jesus:**

We have heard the story of the child who thought the answer to every question the Sunday school teacher asked was Jesus. Here, Peter talks with Cornelius about Jesus. It was a revealed message sent to Israel telling the good news of peace (with God) through Jesus (salvation) who is Lord of all. It was given to the Jews, but it is for everyone. The message about Jesus included:

- v.37-39a: the historical life of Jesus
- v.39b: the death of Jesus and its significance hung on a tree idea of curse.
- v.40-41: the resurrection of Jesus, witnessed, bodily.
- v.42-43: an invitation to believe the message and receive forgiveness of sins.
- v.44-46: a promise those who believe will receive the Holy Spirit.
- v.47: a welcome is extended to join the family of God, the Church; the sign given of inclusion is baptism.

- v.48: further teaching is given as the believer is disciplined.

### **III. Application**

Is change possible? Yes, I believe it is for all who respond to God's initiative, who accept each other as equals and who are prepared to listen and follow the leading of God by His word. As you have been listening, perhaps God has been identifying people with whom you struggle in relationship, or situations that are difficult, and God is saying, *I want to lead you in a period of change*. He never does so to hurt but to heal, not to diminish but to grow. As the Holy Spirit said to Peter, "do not hesitate to go..." Today is a good day. This applies not just as individuals, but as a church, a community, to become a source of life for others.

Peter was on a journey of discovery and we will see next week how following God's initiative led him to many blessings and the gospel became accepted and established in the Gentile world. We are the outcome of that foundational work. Was it easy? Did Peter ever fall away from that direction of travel? Yes, he did. He went back to a position of separation, because he was afraid of the strong and vehement Jewish circumcision party. He was rebuked by Paul (see Galatians 2:11ff). Is that not the beauty of the gospel, the recognition of the universal sinfulness of humanity and the need for the grace of God in Jesus? And what a beautiful thing it is.

Yes, we will fail at times, but as Paul told the church in Philippi: *"Not that I have obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that which Christ Jesus has taken hold of me. Dear family, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:12-14).

**Praise:** Jesus Paid It All

**Prayers for Others**

**Announcements**

**Closing Hymn:** May The Peoples Praise You

**Benediction**

### **Discussion & Application:**

What prejudice and relational conflicts are present in our society? Our church? How do (or might) these impact your personal relationships?

Trace out all that God did to 'destroy the barrier' separating Peter and Cornelius? Also see Ephesians 2:11-22.

True peace is initiated by God's work in the heart and manifests when we purposefully move towards others, rather than away. Choose a situation or relationship in need of God's transforming work. Pray this week that He would change hearts and seek opportunities to move towards others wherever possible.