

John 21: 15-19

Growing Old Gracefully

In the Gospels, Simon Peter is the most frequently mentioned of the twelve disciples. He was the first to call Jesus Messiah. He's been called the Prince of the Apostles, and the first Bishop of Rome. Rumor has it that he's the keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the doorkeeper to eternal bliss, who lets some people in and sends the rest of us elsewhere.

That's quite a résumé. And yet: it's not the whole story. Peter has his dark side. At his core, he was a blowhard, promising much yet often delivering little or nothing. In particular, he pledged his loyalty to Jesus, whatever happened, only to deny that he knew him when Jesus was arrested and executed.

That act of personal betrayal provides the context for today's Bible reading. Peter had denied Jesus three times; Jesus responds by asking him three times: "Do you love me?" The first time he asks Peter, he adds, "...more than all this"? More than: material possessions; the other disciples; the suffocating and corrosive guilt Peter feels, that hangs between them; life itself? Peter insists that Jesus knows that he loves him, and the Bible reading ends with Peter once again a disciple of Jesus. Still, Jesus had the measure of him and knew his tendency to run from hard things, so he warns him of an uncomfortable life and death: "When you grow old, Peter, you will stretch out your hands. And someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go".

It would be nice to tell you that from then on Peter was a changed man. To some extent he was. But occasionally the dark Peter reemerges. As Christian faith spread throughout

the Mediterranean world, Peter and Paul and other leaders made a deal that non-Jews could become Christians. However, many Jewish Christians were reluctant to eat with Gentile Christians because they didn't keep kosher. Peter, however, ate with them in the city of Antioch until Jewish Christians turned up who told him off for doing so. The apostle Paul was furious with Peter and called him a hypocrite. Paul was right: Peter's old self had reared its ugly head. He was fine with taking difficult decisions until he was called to account for them, and then he caved.

Peter's character has provided preachers with great material for sermons on God's grace, her goodness that accepts and uses people, warts and all, to do her will. I've heard many such sermons, and even delivered one or two. It's a comforting thought that God doesn't need us to be perfect and can work with who we really are to make a difference. I've benefited from many such sermons but have always had the niggling thought that maybe they let us off the hook a little too easily.

As I prepared this sermon, I was struck by Jesus's words to Peter, "When you become old." In this Intergenerational Act of Worship, I count as: elderly. I've become old, without any effort on my part, and now I have a different perspective than once I had on human weakness and shortcomings. Telling myself that God has occasionally used me to do decent things despite my frequent unwillingness to cooperate seems true enough but little more than a pious platitude. Retirement in a time of Plague has instead made me ask myself: now that I'm old, what has my life added up to? My daughter recently said to me, out of the blue: "I was looking up your qualifications. Impressive: BA, MA; MLitt with distinction; PhD, Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society. You were once somebody." A few days before, my brother had texted me that he'd seen an online copy of my CV and was amazed by all the things I've done. And yet, they seem long ago and about someone else. They seem: not quite dreck but beside the point.

I look back half a century ago to a young man who wanted to do and be good, who wanted to make a difference, who went to seminary and expected to spend his life as a pastor. To my surprise, instead I became a teacher and, like the Prodigal Son, settled in a far land. I'm far from certain that what I've been and done is what I should have.

Of course, we're more than our jobs. Jesus didn't say to Peter: "Are you willing to be the Bishop of Rome for me?" He said: "Do you love me?" Jesus's words mean that our capacity to love and be loved is transformative; love changes our lives and the lives we touch. But only if we let it.

In my old age, I'm far more aware of my failures to love than I am of my supposed achievements. On days when I'm excessively given to contemplation of all the things that trouble my conscience, I turn to this biblical passage: "When you are old..."

Old age is a gift and a privilege, not a right. I got here, not because I'm worth it and deserve it, but because I'm fortunate. Life has never really been about who I am but who God is. There've been times when I've hurt others and can't mend things but only trust in God who can, and who also forgives and restores. I reflect that Jesus didn't offer Peter an improved character or a meaningful life. He offered Peter: love, divine love; what Christians call grace, the unmerited and undeserved love of the Creator for all whom she has made. My finest achievement has been that, even when events make God seem far from loving, I've trusted that, in the end, to quote Mother Julian of Norwich: "All will be well..."

I imagine that, after Jesus forgave and commissioned him, the young Peter would have been full of what he was going to do and be for Jesus. Over thirty years later, on his way to execution, he would instead have been more grateful for the grace that had helped him cope, the love by which he'd endured.

If time travel existed, I'd go back and tell my younger self that, more important than money, or privilege, or titles, or that job I wanted that slipped from my grasp, is the grace of God that's always there, even when hidden amid sin and tragedy, farce and chaos. I'd like to tell myself: "Don't live your life preoccupied by things that fade away. Just know that the love of God is always there for you. Grow old grace-fully".

Martin Forward