

The God Who Speaks

3: When We Betray

Opening Prayer and Welcome

God our loving Father,
You made us your children in baptism.
Pour out on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit.
Help us as a parish to know the paths we must follow
so as to build up your kingdom.
Teach us to grow in faith,
to encourage one another with words of hope,
and to care for your family with love.
Let us bear witness to the Good News,
and be faithful followers of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever.
Amen

Introduction to the Theme

It's hard not to get cynical. Especially the older we get. We see the things that happen, and we think, "I've seen *that* before": someone we admired getting caught out - as a liar; as a cheat; as sexist; as racist. They get knocked down a peg and we feel a bit more smug. Good person/bad person; good Catholic/bad Catholic: it seems to go on all of the time.

When someone fails we admire them less, we're *disappointed*. Perhaps we've even said that to someone, to our partner, to our children: '*I'm just disappointed in you*'.

Jesus didn't say that to Peter, and Peter really deserved it: he was a liar and a coward. We should probably feel sorry for Pope Francis, being called 'the successor to Peter' because those aren't shoes any smart person would want to fill: a *liar?* a *coward?*

After Jesus told him, 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church' (Matthew 16:18), Peter first of all said 'No' in words (Matthew 16:22) and then in his actions. We need to see how completely Peter betrays Jesus:

Scripture Reading

Matthew 26:69-75 (NRSVACE)

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter

remembered what Jesus had said: ‘Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.

Discussion

You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. Listen to one another because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

Why, do you think, would Matthew tell the story of Peter’s betrayal with so much detail?

What, do you imagine, does Matthew want us to understand?

What does this story make you think of in your own life?

A quiet reflection

Close your eyes and remain in quiet for a little while. Ask yourself if you can feel God’s Presence right now. Or perhaps you can think back to something that happened today, or yesterday, that - on reflection - says to you that God is near, perhaps that God has spoken to you. Or it could be in a memory that comes to mind, where you can say, perhaps, that God was close?

John, in his gospel, tells us this same story of Peter’s betrayal of Jesus, but he adds two important things. The first is that he describes this betrayal as happening at exactly the same moment that Jesus is standing being questioned by the High Priest. We see the contrast: Jesus, abused, alone, speaking the truth; and Peter, hiding in a crowd of people, warming himself by the fire, telling his lies to save his skin. John’s second detail is more than just a statement of fact: it is *dark*.

Luke adds an even more shocking detail to make clear Peter’s betrayal: when Peter denies Jesus for the third time, Luke says, ‘At that instant, *while he was still speaking*, the cock crew, and the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter’.

Betrayal is very, very personal and very, very painful.

If we reflect on it, we are probably aware both of times when we have felt betrayed and times when we have been the betrayer.

Perhaps we feel shame for what we have done, or deep anger towards someone for what *they* have done. It’s no wonder that Peter went out when he heard the cock crow, ‘*and he wept bitterly*’.

Perhaps we have wept bitterly too.

It can be interesting to see what the different gospel writers do with Peter’s betrayal. Matthew and Mark do not mention Peter by name again; Luke gives Peter a small moment - just one sentence - to show that, unlike the other disciples, he was willing to believe that - perhaps - Jesus had risen from the dead: ‘Peter, however, went running to the tomb. He bent down and saw the binding cloths but nothing else; then he went back home, amazed at what had happened’ (Luke 24:12). John also describes Peter running to the tomb and finding Jesus gone, but his gospel ends with a beautiful and memorable encounter between Peter and Jesus:

Scripture Reading

John 21:1-9;12;15 (JB)

Later on, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples. It was by the Sea of Tiberias, and it happened like this: Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathaniel from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two more of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said, 'I'm going fishing'. They replied, 'We'll come with you'. They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night.

It was light by now and there stood Jesus on the shore, though the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. Jesus called out, 'Have you caught anything, friends?' And when they answered, 'No', he said, 'Throw the net out to starboard and you'll find something'. So they dropped the net, and there were so many fish that they could not haul it in. The disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord'. At these words 'It is the Lord', Simon Peter, who had practically nothing on, wrapped his cloak round him and jumped into the water. The other disciples came on in the boat, towing the net and the fish; they were only about a hundred yards from land.

As soon as they came ashore they saw that there was some bread there, and a charcoal fire with fish cooking on it... Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast'.

After the meal Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?' He answered, 'Yes Lord, you know I love you'. Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs'.

Discussion

We're probably familiar with the story: Jesus asks Peter *three times* and each time Peter says says that he loves Jesus and is told to feed his sheep.

And we've probably been told often that these three times allow Peter to make up for the three times when he denied Jesus and said he didn't know him. And that's true.

But there is also something deeper here: what before was darkness and betrayal is now friendship (a shared meal) and light (it is the early morning) and forgiveness. And Jesus never mentions the betrayal: he forgives so completely that Peter needs only to remember how much he loves Jesus in order to move on from his sin.

Betrayal is dark and painful, but Jesus invites us to friendship community, to food and forgiveness.

You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. Listen to one another because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

What do you notice about Jesus? How does he behave? How, do you think, his voice sounds? How, do you imagine, did Peter feel?

What does this story say to you about your own forgiveness?

The Church Teaches

'Maybe someone among us here is thinking: my sin is so great... I don't have the courage to go back, to believe that God can welcome me and that he is waiting for me, of all people. But

God is indeed waiting for you; he asks of you only the courage to go to him. How many times in my pastoral ministry have I heard it said: ‘Father, I have many sins’?; and I have always pleaded: ‘Don’t be afraid, go to him, he is waiting for you, he will take care of everything.’ We hear many offers from the world around us; but let us take up God’s offer instead: his is a caress of love. For God, we are not numbers, we are important, indeed we are the most important thing to him; even if we are sinners, we are what is closest to his heart.’
(Pope Francis, Homily for the Mass for the Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome, 7 April 2013)

*Read this passage again and sit with it for a short while in silence.
Then feel free to share with one another the thoughts that come to your heart.*

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Father, for this time of reflection.
We ask you to give us a fresh understanding of your Presence in our lives.
Strengthen us, we pray, in our faith
Help us to be present to each moment
So that we may see You and hear Your Voice
Everywhere and in all things and all people.
Give us hearts and minds that seek the face of Jesus,
And help us, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
To be always grateful for your blessings,
For the gracious gift of Your Presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ
In the unity of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading suggestion

Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 2014. This is a wonderful collection of extracts from Pope Francis’ speeches and sermons from his first year as Holy Father.

Pope Saint John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), 30 November 1980. This was recently reprinted by the Catholic Truth Society as a small, and very readable booklet, called ‘Rich In Mercy’ (2016), and contains many beautiful reflections on the nature of God’s loving mercy towards us.