

SPG#130, Easter 5C

May 6, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 11:1-18

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

The Apostle Peter is one of those apostles in the New Testament whom I will call iconic. Like the Apostle Paul, there are numerous references to him. He has a prominence in the original twelve disciples. His humanity is clearly apparent in many references. He fished for a living. A few weeks ago it was reported that Peter was naked as he jumped in the sea. It was Peter who also wanted to walk on the water when he saw Jesus walking on the water. But as he approached Jesus he began to sink because of his insecurity.

It was Peter who resisted Jesus washing his feet. It was Peter who denied Jesus three times. But it was also Peter, who in the time of Pentecost, became empowered to do the work of an apostle.

All of us will find many similarities between ourselves and the Apostle Peter. Because of all the followers in the New Testament, he is portrayed as the most vulnerable, the most embarrassingly human. And yet he is also portrayed as one who was most empowered.

Like the other apostles, Peter was well versed in the Judaism of his time. He would have well known the stories and accounts of the Old Testament. One of the hallmarks of first century Judaism was a person's daily diet. There were laws governing the consumption of certain foods. There were laws prohibiting the consumption of meat of certain animals because the animals were seen as "unclean."

So, as one reads the accounts of how Peter became a follower of Jesus, one can imagine how hard it must have been for him to take the uncomfortable with the comfortable.

The healings, the miracles, the teachings, the friendship, and the love were all things that all the disciples thrived on. But this same Jesus would also hang out with sinners like tax collectors. At one time he came to the defense of an outcast woman who was to be stoned. In fact, he seemed to gravitate toward the marginalized in the first century.

Can you imagine what Peter and the others thought when Jesus had a conversation with a Samaritan woman at the well? Even though Samaria was just north of Palestine, Samaritans were not considered part of the people of God. So, in the case of the Samaritan woman, Jesus socialized with a person from an outcast society. In addition, it was a woman, who in those times were considered property of males.

So, even while participating in the joy, the wonder, and the love of following Jesus, the disciples again and again were called to wrestle with their heritage of being part of the chosen people of God and what that meant. And by his associations with marginalized people, he was always calling on them to reconsider.

And even after Jesus died and rose again, this was still very much a live issue for the followers of Jesus. In those days before Pentecost, following Jesus meant becoming a special kind of Jew. So, in following Jesus, it was still assumed that one observed the Jewish customs of the day. Observing those customs, even if you were a follower of Jesus, meant you were still part of the people of God.

For Peter this would become a cardinal issue. Later he and Paul would argue and clash over whether Gentiles, non-Jews, should observe the Jewish dietary laws if they wanted to become part of the Jesus movement in Judaism.

That then is the background of today's reading from Acts where Peter has a vision. The vision is a huge sheet that has many forbidden and unclean animals on it. A voice then says to Peter, **Kill and eat**. Peter refuses, noting that the animals are unclean.

The voice replies, **What God has made clean, you must not call profane.**

This occurred three times in his vision. Peter then was led via this vision into a ministry to the Gentiles. He face his "us and them" ideas of the people of God and realized that the Gentiles under God had the same privileges and opportunities that the Jews did.

Sometimes I think we miss the import of Peter's vision. Because in the vision he comes face to face with a tradition that had been in place for thousands of years. And so once again, even after Jesus had left his life in the flesh, Peter was called upon to count the cost of being a follower. It was a change that he and the others resisted and wrestled with, but eventually embraced.

This is one of those stories where the application seems obvious. Our call, our hospitality is not just to people who are like us, but to everyone who would come here, to everyone we would encounter. But consider that the meaning of this story could well be a more spiritual one.

Consider that God always loves us more than we love ourselves. Consider that God always loves others more than we do. We could say, "Well, that is par for the course. God is God, and we are human." So, of course God loves better than we do."

But what if there were ways of loving of which we had not imagined? What if there were ways of accepting that were beyond all that we are doing now? What if loving less were a human pitfall of which we always needed to be aware? Peter had no idea that Gentiles could be accepted equally until he met Jesus, until he had his vision. Are we so different? Are there people whom we consider impossible to love? Are there people whom we consider impossible to accept? Are there people that we will only accept on our own terms? Could it be that one of our struggles is with our own self-righteousness? Could it be that God would show us a way to love that is broader and deeper than we ever imagined?

I suspect that the answer to all those questions is "yes." And the question that would follow it might be, "Would we allow for such a new love?"

May the vision of the Apostle Peter lead us to a new love and a new acceptance of ourselves, of those around us, and those whom God sends our way. Amen.

