

What he said

When we meet the apostle Peter – and an apostle is an authorised messenger and teacher – we meet a man who is renowned, I think, more for his actions than for his eloquence or long discourses. We meet Peter the brash, the bold, the one who will speak up (he can get praised one moment and smacked down the next – how many minutes do you think elapsed between the time Jesus said ‘Blessed are you Simon ...’ and ‘get behind me, Satan’??). Before Jesus’ died on the last night he didn’t make what we might call today ‘the good confession’ and wept bitterly for it. Restored by Jesus he was a rock of the early church which was built on the foundation of Jesus – and it was Peter who gave us one of the first answers to the question about Jesus’ identity. But the church wasn’t built on Peter the Rock but rather on his confession – for Jesus is our refuge and strength, the rock to save or sadly to crush.

Bold as he was at Pentecost, a central figure in the early church, Peter was still learning about what his words meant in practical terms when it came to how Jews and Gentiles related together as Christians and Peter got it wrong at times (Gal 2) and had to learn again. We know little more about this married man, possibly older than many of the other apostles, worldly (not in a bad sense just with experience), a businessman, maybe a father. Church tradition tells us that Peter was executed for his words, his confession, and this time he stuck to what they said and told the world to do its worst. In fact tradition goes that Peter asked to be crucified upside down as he was not worthy enough to be crucified in the same way as his Lord and so this first bishop of Rome departs from the world stage but enters the heavenly rest. And as with all of us, all that is really left are the words.

For example ...

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practise these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”, we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:1-18)

As I mentioned in the bulletin, this letter is practical – it’s about living, living in the end times, living as disciples of Jesus. What I find interesting in New Testament studies is that many scholars would argue that this letter couldn’t have been written by Peter himself but

rather by someone in his name or to emphasise 1 Peter. We tend to take a different view of authorship today but pseudepigraphy (literally 'false writing / inscription') was practised considerably in the ancient world of attributing works to famous authors for various – not all cynical or bad reasons – it could have been and often it was, to honour the person in whose name it is written – again written often by a student or an admirer. So with this possibility many scholars studying the NT texts have concluded for textual and historical reasons that 2 Peter was written more like 100-150 AD than before the mid 60sAD and therefore couldn't have been written by Peter. Why mention it? Well for one thing, it is part of the academic world and these ideas do filter into popular culture – think Da Vinci Code which can be snapped up by the public. For another thing we always have opportunities to engage in various ideas, theories, debates and shouldn't be scared by them but engage them, take them on so to speak, learn from them where possible, but stick to the essential confession.

Any debate on the authorship or historicity of 2 Peter has to take into account that the letter is canonised, i.e., it is authoritative in the Church because its message confesses Jesus is Lord and talks about the consequences and realities of that confession. And the reality according to St Peter is that faith in Jesus is more than knowledge of Jesus – even if that knowledge is correct and accurate. Faith in Jesus is life in Jesus is living with Jesus is relational and we have an impact on that – we can choose life style choices, deeds, behaviours, attitudes that reflect our relationship with Jesus – the one he established – not to work our way to salvation but as a consequence of our salvation. Like training as an athlete, we can grow in skills and experiences – but now its of God's faithfulness and goodness as we practise, train, seek virtue, self control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love.

Peter's urging of this lifestyle is based undoubtedly on his experiences but he doesn't say: 'Look at me ... don't do these things that I did (eg. betrayal) and do these things (eg. boldly witnessing at Pentecost).' Rather he points to Jesus – in this case Jesus transfigured on the mountain – to Jesus' majesty and glory.

This is what Christian confession is all about – using words to point to Jesus. These 'Jesus pointing' words are used by the Holy Spirit to build the church, the body of Christ with Jesus as its head or Lord. The speaker of such words may be killed but the message continues. The speaker might not even believe the words (eg. think demons who confess Jesus accurately) but the words still have power to bring Jesus into focus – maybe momentarily in the hearer's life. The speaker may not say what he/she wanted to say as clearly or as fluently as they would wish but Jesus still comes to people – and the speaker can learn to fill in the gaps in his/her knowledge or practise skills that help with the sharing.

If the world continues after we have died, the only thing that will last are our words and of those, the ones with true staying power and the ones really beneficial is the confession of Jesus – he loves me, he died for me, he rose again for me, and he gives me his life.