

# RETREAT AT ILKLEY: TALK FOR SUNDAY MORNING

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Yesterday we thought about the reality of the Cross - that mystery which Jesus knew in advance, and predicted: and which those who loved him resisted so powerfully. Today I would like us to think about one person who was close to him in his mysterious journey: the apostle Peter. And I would like to follow through yesterday's method by seeing how he is described to us in Luke's Gospel. What did he see as his rôle in the life of Jesus?

There is a moment of considerable grace at the beginning of the story Luke tells.

## Luke 3: 1-11

I think it's good to note that the story is not told at the beginning of John's Gospel, but tacked on at the end. I always find the decision to go fishing rather lamely introduced here; it seems such a banal thing to do in the aftermath of the first Easter! There on the shore is the risen Lord himself; hidden, as at Emmaus, from the eyes of his disciples. He calls to ask if they have caught anything, and they tell him no. Then he directs them to let down the nets, and the miraculous draught of fishes suddenly breaks in to the workaday atmosphere, and the Beloved Disciple suddenly says: *It is the Lord!* At these words Peter hurls himself out of the boat and swims for the shore, and there his Master breaks the bread for them all, and then rehabilitates Peter with his threefold question, *Do you love me, Simon Peter?*

There are the themes: the risen Lord, the aftermath of Peter's denial, the huge delivery of transfigured hope, the transcendently *convalescent* atmosphere generated by the living Christ. This is the story Luke relocates, to be the frame of Peter's calling; the results are obvious. This Jesus is calling an industrious fisherman to a following whose terms he already knows, but Peter does not. And Jesus will continue to be ahead of him all the way, until the moment when Jesus is coming definitively to grief, and Peter feels the initiative definitively being taken from his hands.

Peter always wants to have the initiative. He thinks he is a born leader, he is always the one to open his mouth, he leads the others in what he thinks is the right response to Jesus. So often he gets it wrong, and Jesus is led to correct him with varying degrees of sharpness. The harshest of these is the moment where Peter protests at the first prediction of the Cross, and Jesus calls him Satan in Mark and Matthew: Luke deliberately eliminates this head-on clash between Peter and Jesus. Yet he builds up methodically the notion that, beneath his outward compliance with Jesus, Peter is the one who secretly knows best; and when the predicted crisis comes, Peter will be there with his streetwise weaponry: he will save the day, he will save Jesus from himself and the crazy plan of self-sacrifice which Peter cannot tolerate. Luke does not name him, but the other Gospels assure us that it is Peter who brings the sword into the garden, Peter who takes a pointless and ridiculous swipe at the high-priest's servant, and receives his last reprimand from Jesus. Something dies in Peter at that critical moment, as he sees the handcuffs going on and the arresting party forming up to return. He now accepts that he has failed, that his plans have all come to nothing. The hero who wanted to die for his Master is forbidden even to draw his sword; Jesus' last act of physical healing is to undo the wound Peter had inflicted. The great gesture is utterly refused, outlawed, made to look stupid and wrong. But something else goes west too: Peter's whole notion of a God who comes in like the seventh cavalry, the victorious God of Israel: he is dealt a mortal blow in this garden, where the agony is now over. Jesus is showing a weakness that, until now, Peter would have been happy to call contemptible. Peter too has the wind taken from his sails. What does Jesus want of him? Has

he nothing to offer that can help his Master? See the hopelessness with which he follows Jesus - at a distance, because he cannot go with him, he cannot stand by him any more: he has been dismissed from the company of Jesus. Now see the irony of the denials: *This man was with him too!* But Peter denied it. A couple of hours ago, he said, "I will go with you to prison, to death!" But it isn't true, and Peter now wonders if he has ever really been close to Jesus, if he has ever understood him at all. "*I don't know him,*" he says sadly, and he is right. As the words are wrenched from him, we can feel a tide of horror rising in him, as he sees the prediction he had refused coming true before his eyes. "*You are one of them too.*" "*I am not, my friend.*" Here is a touch of contempt: where, after all, are "they"? They have scattered and saved themselves. At least Peter tried to do something, didn't just melt into the darkness. An hour goes by, and we can imagine what this hour is for Peter: who am I, what am I doing here, what has become of all that I valued and believed in? It seems I got it all wrong, and I no longer know what to say or do. "*You're surely one of them - you're a Galilean!*" "*I don't know what you are saying!*" Remember the scene of the Transfiguration, where the sudden glory of Jesus takes his breath: At that moment Luke says of Peter: *he did not know what he was saying.* Now here is the echo, in a different Transfiguration, and Peter does not know what *anyone* is saying, even when they are simply saying of him *you are a Galilean.* At that moment the cock crows, and suddenly the last full-stop is placed on the account of Peter's downfall: it was predicted, and what Jesus predicts always comes to pass. So here you are, the Rock, the keeper of the Kingdom, the protector of the Messiah, the saviour of Jesus: this is what you have come to. Peter's collapse is complete, and now he is ready for the real moment of salvation, the moment when the Saviour can begin to work for him. Peter looks up, and Jesus turns and looks directly at him: *now* he is Jesus, the Saviour, and Peter is ready to receive mercy and pardon, the first in the world to accept the grace of the Cross. The tide breaks that has been running in him. He goes out. He weeps bitterly.

What has happened to him can be briefly expressed. He wanted to be the one who would do the business for Jesus. He knew that there was something wonderful about this man, when he brought him the miraculous fish, back on the lake at home; he was willing to be a fisher of men, a dispenser, a minister of the gifts of Jesus. What he has never realized until now is that he himself will be the first receiver of forgiveness, that he will be the first to taste the mercy of Jesus. The look of Jesus says, *Peter, I love you even like this; I knew you were like this, I loved you knowing you were like this.* Peter, in fact, has had to do the hardest thing some people will ever have to do: he has to let himself be loved, let himself be forgiven, let himself be saved. In a way it is what Jesus tells Peter at the washing of feet in John's Gospel: unless *I wash you*, you can have no inheritance in me.

Lord, help us to let ourselves be loved, and to learn how to respond obediently:  
to love you with all our heart, and mind, and strength, as you have loved us;  
and then to love our neighbour as ourselves.