

Every year at about this time we invite someone to come and preach at our patronal festival, our celebration of St Peter, and year by year our visitors tell us all sorts of things about him. So, having been invited for the first time (only twenty years after arriving in the parish) to preach for St Peter's Day, I thought it would be fun to begin by finding out how much we remember. I haven't been able to produce one of my fiendish Coronavirus quizzes for a week or two, so here is a simple St Peter Quiz instead. Answers at coffee time!

1. Where did Peter originally come from?
2. Jesus changed his disciple's name to Peter. What was he called before then?
3. When Peter saw Elijah and Moses on the mountain with Jesus, what did he suggest he should do?
4. How is Peter supposed to have died?
5. Of what groups of people is St Peter the patron saint? (One point for each – there are twelve!)
6. What is the exact dedication of the chapel on Tower Green in the Tower of London, and why is it appropriate?
7. In the diocese of London, how many parish churches are dedicated to St Peter (alone)?

Churches have been dedicated to saints for as long as there have been churches, sometimes because the church was on a site connected with the saint, sometimes to put the church under the saint's special protection, sometimes to provide a focus and inspiration for the local community. I suspect the latter is most likely to be true for us. If you've read the history of the church you will know that when, in 1889, it was planned to replace the original iron church dedicated to St Andrew, the other St Andrew's down the road asked for the new church to have a different name. So the committee voted for Andrew's brother, and a hundred and twenty-eight years ago, St Peter became our focus and inspiration. A very good one, too.

We know a lot more about St Peter than of many saints, and what we know makes him easier to relate to than many saints. At the time we first hear of him he was a fisherman from a very modest background. He wouldn't have had much education; probably just enough to memorise chunks of the scriptures and take his place in the synagogue as an adult Jewish man. We don't know if he could read or write (and the two Epistles of Peter were almost certainly not written by him). He had a boat, but if he didn't catch fish there was no money. We do know that he was married – there's nothing about a wife or children but he definitely had a mother-in-law. He was a normal, ordinary working man like hundreds of others until Jesus picked him out (or, in the version in John's gospel, until Andrew took him to Jesus).

It's not surprising that one of the groups for whom Peter is a patron (I bet you didn't get this one) is people with foot problems. Peter had foot problems. As we follow him through the gospels we can see, again and again, that when he opened his mouth he put his foot in it, or that his approach to a situation was to jump in with both feet – in one case literally – when a more measured response might have been appropriate. He says the wrong thing, doesn't understand what is going on, acts impulsively and has to be reprimanded, declares his undying loyalty to Jesus and then, when the pressure is on, runs away in fear for his own life, realises what he has done and is distraught. We know this. We hear the gospels read year by

year, follow Jesus through the events of Holy Week and wait in expectation – as the disciples could not – of the resurrection. Peter went to the tomb, saw it was empty, and went home.

The crucial importance of Peter to our faith becomes clear in what happened after this. In one of his resurrection appearances Jesus challenges Peter again, and Peter, who had bitterly repented of his earlier actions, three times affirms his love and loyalty. From then on he is a different man. He becomes the leader of the disciples, proposing the selection of a replacement for Judas Iscariot and, to everyone’s amazement, preaching eloquently at Pentecost. He performs the first miracles since Jesus’s death, challenges the Jewish authorities, is miraculously released from prison twice, and converts and baptizes the first Gentiles – Cornelius’s household. He was completely transformed, and through this transformation Christianity began to grow and spread through Judea and then around the lands bordering the Mediterranean. He truly is the rock on which Jesus built his church, and we are meeting today as a result of his commitment to bring others to believe what he had finally understood.

But even that is not our most important inspiration. Peter is our example of the mess we can make of our own attempts to love and follow Jesus and the forgiveness that is waiting for us when we realise what we’ve done. We can make mistakes and be forgiven, be angry and be forgiven, do wrong and be forgiven, abandon Jesus altogether and be forgiven, not just once, or seven times, but seventy times seven. We can learn. We can change. We can do better. We can come back to God, whatever our lives have been like and however long we’ve ignored him. We can answer the same question Jesus put to Peter: ‘Do you love me?’ and start again with Jesus’s command: ‘Follow me!’

1. Bethsaida, in Galilee.
2. Simon.
3. Build three booths (shelters) for them.
4. He was crucified upside down.
5. Fishermen, netmakers, shipbuilders, locksmiths, bakers, butchers, harvesters, cordwainers, horologists, stationers, cobblers, people with foot problems.
6. St Peter ad Vincula – St Peter in Chains – the Tower of London held many prisoners.