Good Friday Three Hours' Devotion
Blessed are the poor in spirit: Simon Peter
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Matthew 5:3

Matthew 26:30-34, 56b-57, 69-75

These two beatitudes, 'Blessed are the pour in spirit', and 'blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake', share the same end: the kingdom of heaven. The story of Peter shows this all too well.

At John's telling of the last supper, just before Jesus foretells of Peter's impending denial, he says to Peter, 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterwards' (John 13.36). This assurance that Peter will follow Jesus again shows that forgiveness is awaiting Peter already, already on offer before he goes through with his sin. Jesus offers forgiveness and renewal to Peter

even before Peter denies knowing him. Such is the love of our Saviour.

This statement to Peter, that he will be able to follow him later on, but cannot now, is a vivid statement of discipleship. Jesus has already made clear to his disciples that to follow him is to go where he is going (John 12.26)—not to pay lip service, not to simply follow commands or do as one is told, but to rise, walk, follow. To be where Jesus is.

This radical statement of forgiveness to Peter, is a clear reference to sharing in the resurrected and glorified life of Christ: Jesus came from the Father and is returning to the Father, Peter cannot follow him yet, but will be able to in the future. A beautiful promise of redemption. However, the redemption of Christ, the new life of resurrection, the glory of Easter, is always a glory *through*.

Through denial and betrayal, *through* the beating and the mockery, *through* death and the grave. Christ's promise to Peter to, one day, be able to follow him where he is going, is a vivid, breathtaking, halting, call of discipleship because it is not only a promise of future glory, but of being able, being ready, to follow Jesus on the way *through* to glory.

For this, Peter claims fervently that he is indeed ready: 'Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you', Peter claims. But this is the following of lip service, or duty to one's master, even if also of sincere, but ignorant, love of a friend. Peter speaks without really understanding what he is saying. Perhaps Peter was ready to die for Jesus, say in battle—to fight for the cause, to draw his sword in the Garden. But inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven, that Kingdom whose glory is always *through*, requires not the bombastic, vengeful,

enraged spirit of a warrior—that sort of glory is easy to come by. This Kingdom requires a spirit of humility, a spirit of poverty. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', Peter was not yet ready for.

So yes, to lose his life for the Lord in battle, or perhaps even to throw himself in front of a bus, so to speak, to save the life of Jesus, maybe Peter was ready for this—the kind of laying down of one's life that gets you the glory of the front page, that harrows your name down through the ages as a victor. In this sense, he was not lying, and was not entirely naive when he said he would die for Christ, but rather ignorant or deceived about the Kingdom of Heaven.

To lose his life for the Lord through ridicule, through mockery, through death as a convicted criminal—one amongst a thousand hanging, slain, lining the streets outside the city walls—that is, of

course, a different story. It takes a different sort of spirit, a new disposition, to hit the front page for reasons of scandal: to trade the glamour of fame for the shame of infamy.

This, Jesus says, this sort of Kingdom, Peter, you are not yet ready for. You cannot yet follow me there.

Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio, had the gift of bringing what has been called an 'intensely imagined inwardness' of his subjects to his viewers. The figures in the paintings are immersed inwardly in themselves, and looking into a Caravaggio one begins to look inside the soul of the figures in the painting.

One of his final paintings, completed just shortly before his tragic early death, is the 'Denial of St Peter'. Our eyes are immediately drawn to the

woman who has approached Peter, accusing him of being a follower of Jesus. Caravaggio, as is distinctly characteristic of his work, plays with light and darkness, and the only source of light in the painting is the fire by which Peter warms himself in the courtyard of the high priest, and the woman's eyes are illuminated while the rest of her body can barely be made out in the shadows.

Also characteristic of Caravaggio, there seems to be no staging involved. We have a precise moment, here. It is as if he took a photograph, and the subjects are completely unprepared, caught in their brief, momentary, unreadiness; unable to hide themselves—no pretension, no time to strike a pose. There is simply the truth of a particular fragment of time. The woman is vaguely glaring toward the soldier whose features are completely lost in the shadows, though Caravaggio seems to have caught her gaze as it slips past the soldier, as

if her mind has wondered off, she is no longer even very interested in Peter, it seems.

The soldier, questioning Peter with an accusatory finger, directs our eyes to the true focus of this moment, the worried, frenzied, internal gaze of Peter. He curls both hands in toward his chest, as if to say, '*Me*? *Me*, a disciple of *Him*?'. Peter's eyes don't meet either the soldier or the woman. He gazes past them both. He doesn't want to be seen eye to eye, he doesn't want to be recognised for who he truly is. He doesn't want anyone to be able to see past his outward guise, to the condition of his spirit. But Caravaggio lets us in. Peter's scrunched forehead, defensive posture, and diverted gaze give him away.

He avoids the prison cell or perhaps even a cross beside Jesus—the shame of scandal, but he is no hero either. Neither fame nor infamy, neither

victory or defeat, just a shameful, indifferent, act of self-protectionism. And then it hits him. Then the cock crows. And just beyond his self-defence at the fireside, just beyond Caravaggio's frame, his spirit breaks. Peter 'went out and wept bitterly' (Matt 26.75).

It is this experience, perhaps, through which Peter is prepared to follow Christ to where he is going. It is perhaps this experience which drives Peter to the poverty of spirit that leads him a few days later not to hide away in shame or fear but run to the tomb; that drives him to the poverty of spirit that eventually leads him to be persecuted for righteousness sake; that leads him to write in his second epistle, 'Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed' (2 Peter 4.13). It seems he understands now what it means to lay hold of Christ's Kingdom.

One of Caravaggio's most famous and beautiful works is the crucifixion of St Peter, who tradition records was crucified upside down as he did not see himself as worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. It hangs behind an altar in the Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. Here, again in Caravaggio's photographic style, a precise moment is captured. Peter is being raised up on the cross, head facing down towards the earth, and his gaze, his gaze is no longer one seeking to divert from the truth, and it is no longer a subjective, self-centredness, trapped by fear. It is now a calm, collected, fixed, unbroken and wide-eyed contemplation of the altar crucifix in front of him. Peter's eyes are set like flint toward the sacrifice of Christ as if to say, now, now, I am ready to follow you in glory; now, I am ready to lay hold of the Kingdom of Heaven.

'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterwards'. We are, as Peter, faced with the base question of being a disciple of Christ. Are we, in poverty of spirit, ready to go where Jesus goes. Are we ready for the glory of the Kingdom, that glory which is always a glory *through*. A glory through Good Friday; a glory through crucifixion.