

Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

+

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Peter the Apostle, the patron of our parish. We hear the lessons for today and perhaps we think that Saint Peter is unapproachable, even more intimidating with the title "saint" before his name. We hear that St. Peter is delivered from prison by the miraculous work of an Angel, the chains that had bound his hands and feet fall off, the locked gates open before him. We hear in the Gospel that St. Peter gives Jesus the right answer, he seems to know exactly who Jesus is, and he is rewarded with the promise, *with this confession of faith I shall build my church, and I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.* We hear the popular references to *St. Peter and the pearly gates*, we hear that he is the *chief of the Apostles* and *the First Pope*. We see that word "saint" in front of his name, and we fall into thinking he is just an unapproachable, un-relatable, perfect human being. But in St. Peter we are confronted with a character that is so human that he makes us uncomfortable, precisely because he is so easy for us to relate to.

Peter was brought to Jesus by his brother Andrew, and Jesus immediately renames him, *Cephas*, or "Rocky." Maybe Jesus saw that he was a little dense, a little hard headed, a little hot tempered too. We believe St. Peter had a fishing business, was married and had a family. We know this because we read in the Gospels that his mother-in-law was healed by Jesus. He is probably also the oldest of the Disciples. But we see that these characteristics do not disqualify St. Peter from following Jesus, and he is quickly taken into Jesus' inner circle. St. Peter is one of the three disciples that goes up to witness the Transfiguration and other signs and wonders. He is allowed to witness the Transfiguration and then misses the point by wanting to build three shrines on the spot for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. He is often rash and hasty. He sees Jesus walking on the water in the midst of a storm, and he decides that he too must walk on the water, but he is afraid of the storm and begins to sink, and Jesus says to him *oh ye of little faith, why did you begin to doubt?* St. Peter pledges his loyalty and his life to Jesus at the Last Supper, only to be warned that before Jesus is crucified he will deny Jesus three times. He can also be irritable and lose his temper, Jesus tells them that He must die, and Peter gets angry and says, *Never Lord! This will never happen to you!* And Jesus rebuked Peter saying, *get behind me Satan! You have only human concerns in mind and not the concerns of God.* And let us not forget that St. Peter carried a sword into the Garden of Gethsemane the night that Jesus was arrested, and tried to defend Jesus by cutting off the ear of one of the High Priest's servants. So much for this great saint.

St. Peter was far from perfect. He was protective of his Lord, Jesus Christ. He was unlearned in the Mosaic Law yet he was jealous for the Gospel and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He denied our Lord three times, yet he remained loyal, he repented of his sin of denial three times by pledging his love three times. After the Resurrection of Jesus, he goes fishing, and seeing the risen Lord on the shore he does not bring the boat ashore, but he jumps out of the boat and swims to the Lord. In the Gospels, St. Peter is not always the picture perfect example of adult maturity or even of supernatural holiness. Maybe he is not the best candidate in our opinion to receive the keys to the kingdom of heaven, but this is not how God works. If we want to understand how God works, how he can change the heart of man, we must examine the life of St. Peter in the book of Acts. St. Peter is present on Pentecost, he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and emerges as the leader of the Apostles. He preaches an incredible and eloquent sermon that first Pentecost and over three thousand are converted and added to the Church that day. St. Peter is enlightened by the Holy Spirit and along with St. Paul helps to move the Church away from the constraints of the Jewish religion and closer to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God begins to work more forcefully through St. Peter in the book of Acts as well, and we read there that St. Peter begins to work miracles, he heals the lame man with the words, *take up thy bed and walk*, and even his shadow falling over the sick has the power to heal.

St. Peter is proof to us that God can transform us for his glory. God takes the hard-headed, stubborn, hot tempered, St. Peter, and upon his confession of faith promises to build His Church. St. Peter definitely understood who Jesus is, *thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*. And we know according to the teaching of the Church that St. Peter is martyred for this confession. He is crucified upside-down, because he felt himself unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as Jesus. Perhaps St. Peter is not so un-relatable after all. He may be the most human of all the Disciples. He is a fallible human-being made holy through his zeal and love for Christ. His life is a road map of holiness for us all. God uses imperfect humans for the good of His Church. He has built His Church through the work of men that were not always obvious candidates for sainthood, and yet the Church still stands and the gates of hell have yet to prevail against it. Amen.