

Sermon – 20/05/2007 am

This is Your Life

Study Text: John 21:18-19

‘This is your life’ was a popular TV programme. It was interesting to learn about the lives of prominent people in society. It is interesting to learn about the life of anyone. We have all had many experiences, good and bad, that have shaped our lives and made us who we are today. For a Christian of course, coming to believe in Jesus will always stand out as the most significant change in their life. If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come.

Imagine the apostle Peter being featured on a program like ‘This is your life’. What an interesting story he would have to tell. A bold, outspoken follower of Jesus, Peter then denied his master. From the depths he was restored by the risen Jesus and again called to follow Jesus. He was commissioned to ‘feed my sheep’.

But there is something even more interesting about Peter, something unique to human kind. Peter would not only tell about his past but also about his future. Not his future as he saw it, but his future as divinely revealed. Jesus told Peter how he was going to die. Peter would live for some thirty years knowing how he was going to die. He even spoke of this in his letters (II Peter 1:14).

Young Peter

Jesus restored Peter to himself. He made him confront his past, he clarified the nature of their relationship, and at the same time he commissioned Peter to shepherd the people of God. Was this going to be an easy task for Peter? Did Jesus promise him health, wealth and happiness when he followed him? Would Peter become a respected leader in society and have people flocking to him for a blessing wherever he went? What did Jesus tell Peter to expect in the days ahead?

Addressing Peter specifically, Jesus said ‘amen, amen’ or *assuredly I say to you* (21:18). Only Jesus ever spoke in this way and he spoke this way because he is the Son of God. Jesus knows the future and can speak with full knowledge about the future. Jesus knows the past also. Jesus knew Peter’s past even before he called him to leave his fishing and his family to follow him. He told Peter that when he was young he dressed himself and went wherever he wanted to go.

Is there a touch of rebuke in these words? Peter was certainly very confident and assertive. He went boldly ahead doing what he wanted. He was the one who said ‘I am going fishing’. He was the one who jumped out of the boat when told that it was Jesus on the shore. He did not wait to help the others bring in the nets. Peter was not good at listening or taking instructions.

Peter would have been much sought after by the business world of today. He was a man who loved to be out in the front. He was confident in his own ability – over confident actually. Peter did not wait for others, nor did he depend on others. Others may be weak and stumble, but not Peter! Remember his words to Jesus – ‘even if all are made to stumble I will never be

made to stumble' (Matthew 26:33). This was not humble commitment, but bold assertion. He asserted that he was better than the rest.

This was how Peter had lived thus far. 'I do what I want, wear what I want, eat what I want, and go where I want when I want'. Such a motto is widely heard today. Maybe you are living with such thoughts in your heart. Our society applauds this spirit of independence, but is it not bringing grief to many families today? Is this not what leads to the breakdown of relationships all around us?

The other day I watched a toddler trying to dress herself. She proudly rejected any help offered by her mother. She was going to dress herself even if she had two arms in the one sleeve, and the dress on back to front. 'I did it my way' she could claim. I have watched an elderly person reject the help of a walking stick only to come crashing down. Is such an independent spirit wise or helpful?

The Son of God was not above asking for help. When he was thirsty he asked the woman at the well for a drink. He invited himself to stay at the home of Zacchaeus. Here by the lake he asked the disciples to bring some of their fish to put on the fire, even though he already had some cooking. Jesus was not fiercely independent. He was not afraid to demonstrate his apparent need. The apostle Paul was a bit like Peter, but he learnt that 'when I am weak then I am strong'.

Successful missionaries are usually those who humble themselves before the Lord and before the local people. Many biographies overlook this fact. I remember going to a village to give out blankets. Naturally this made me feel good. But when I gave one poor widow a thick woollen blanket, she turned around with something to give me. It was something of no value to me, apart from making me humble. She gave me a garland of biscuits! A fiercely independent spirit does not foster fellowship.

Old Peter

When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird/dress you and carry you where you do not wish (21:18). There is a stark contrast between the life of young Peter and the life of old Peter. He will no longer do what he wants but what others tell him. He will no longer go where he wishes but will be carried where he does not wish to go. But more than this contrast in lifestyle, Jesus was speaking about the death that Peter would die, as the following verse indicates.

To have your hands stretched out was widely understood in the ancient world to refer to crucifixion. Jesus was *signifying by what death he (Peter) would glorify God* (21:19). Peter would become a martyr. He would die like his master. He would have a beam tied across his shoulders and be led to his death. Earlier Christian writers, like Clement of Rome and Tertullian, mention the martyrdom of Peter in Rome during the time of the emperor Nero.

In the upper room Jesus told the impetuous and impatient Peter that he could not follow him now because Jesus was going to the Cross – but that he would follow him later (13:37). It appears that some thirty years later this word came true. Peter probably remembered this word, as well as what Jesus spoke to him here by the lake. As we have seen, he made mention of how he must put *of my tent just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me* (II Peter 1:14).

Peter carried this information about his death all the years of his ministry. He knew he was going to suffer at the hands of men in death. How would you live if you knew you were going to suffer as Peter did? Would you try to escape? How do you live now, knowing that you are going to die even if you don't know how or when? Will you go on living to please yourself, and not thinking of others? Will you go on living to please yourself and not thinking about Jesus? Writing to the Philippians Paul lamented the fact that *all seek their own and not the things which are of Christ* (Philippians 2:21).

Glorify God

Peter had a great ministry. He was the first to preach the gospel. Along with John he was beaten by the Jews but stood up to them saying *we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard* (Acts 4:20). He rejoiced in being counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41). Peter took the gospel to the Gentile, Cornelius. He did not hold back because of this revelation about his death. He went on to glorify God in his death according to John 21:19.

We do not have an account of Peter's death and its effect on the church, but we have numerous other accounts of men and women who have glorified God in their death. Samson did more in his death than in all his life to glorify God. Stephen's martyrdom brought great persecution but also led to the expansion of the church. Down through history the death of martyrs has been the seed of the church. It was so in England when Latimer, Ridley and others were martyred by Mary. Death brings glory to no man but it can bring glory to God.

Death is not something a Christian craves, but something he endures with patience and hope (I Thessalonians 4:13). The flesh is weak, as Jesus said, but he can make our spirit strong. Ryle says that when Ridley was being chained to the stake before being burned as a martyr at Oxford he said to the smith who was knocking in the staples 'Good fellow knock it in hard for the flesh will have its way'.

Follow Me

And when he had spoken this Jesus said to Peter 'follow me' (21:19). Jesus had just finished telling Peter how he would suffer and die! He said to him 'follow me'. This was no invitation to a picnic. He was not inviting Peter to an easy or prosperous life. He was not telling Peter he could go on doing what he liked. He was calling Peter to a life of suffering. By his own life Jesus had shown Peter how to live...and die. 'Follow me' he said.

This was not the first time Jesus had called Peter to follow him. Peter had stumbled but Jesus graciously restored him. He would soon learn what following Jesus means. He would learn what it is to obey, he would learn what it is to suffer, and he would learn what it is to die for Jesus. *Therefore brethren be even more diligent to make your call and election sure for if you do these things you will never stumble, for so an entrance will be supplied abundantly to you into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ* (II Peter 1:10-11).

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