

June 2, 2013

Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Peter, Apostle

Peter's name, which is the first word in the longer of his two epistles, is immediately qualified by the noun "apostle." The absence of the definite article with this noun prompts most English translations to insert the indefinite article, "an Apostle," indicating that Peter was one of a group.

While this is grammatically correct—nor, given the difficulty of translating from one idiom to another, can I think of an obvious alternative—this rendering can be misleading. Although it is true that Peter was one of a group, the absence of the definite article in that first verse implies something more and a tad subtle: The noun "apostle" here, used without the article, points to the quality of Peter's testimony, the proper note of the authority with which he writes; it modifies Peter, making his apostleship the foundation of the pastoral concern he expresses in this letter. As he begins to dictate to Silvanus (cf. 5:12), Peter formally and explicitly puts on his apostle-hat, as it were, and he wears it throughout the ensuing message. He is not sending his readers his good advice; he is speaking on behalf of God's Son.

Peter has clearly come a long way since God's Son called him to the apostleship. Whatever schooling he received as a boy growing up in the synagogue, Peter could still be called, in those early years, "unschooled and ignorant" (Acts 4:13). Things had already begun to change, however, even then. At 9 o'clock on the morning of Pentecost, Peter emerged from that upper room with an impressive command of the Holy Scriptures, enough to prompt 3000 souls to accept Baptism.

Among the original Twelve, Peter is invariably listed first (cf. Mark 3:17-19; Acts 1:13). Peter was difficult to ignore. In the New Testament, he appears very much as an in-your-face apostle. It was he, after all, who flung himself into the lake and swam toward the risen Jesus, while the others came rowing to shore in their boats (John 21:7-8). On that occasion Peter was at least swimming toward the Lord and did not attempt, as he had earlier done, to walk to Him on the surface of the water (Matthew 14:28-31).

Even though Peter often served as a spokesman for the others (Matthew 19:27; Mark 1:36), one has the impression he may have overdone it on occasion. He

sometimes went out of his way to distinguish himself, to set himself apart, from the rest of the Apostles—“Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be” (Mark 14:29). A consummate alpha personality, Peter was like the very sun, a boisterous giant rejoicing to run his course; there was nothing hidden from his burning heat.

When Jesus called him “Rock” (Kephas, Petros), the name was more of a prophecy than a fact, for it would be some time before Peter acquired the qualities of solidity, steadfastness and dependability associated with that name. In the Gospels Peter displays traits widely at variance: he boasts, he remonstrates, he curses, he weeps. He is emotional, generous, impetuous, affectionate, and—in the hour of crisis—undependable. Only in the years to come would these traits be purified in the fires of trial and humiliation.

We see the beginnings of this transformation in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, where he assumes a special leadership in the Church. Peter it was who determined—without prior counsel from the other apostles—to receive the first Gentiles into the community of faith. Peter it was who encouraged his brethren to sanction the pastoral policies that made Paul’s ministry so fruitful.

None of these decisions came easily, nor did Peter completely escape criticism from the other Apostles (cf. Acts 11:1-3); Galatians 2:11). The two epistles that bear his name, however, testify that Peter never compromised on, nor pulled back from, the threefold confession of love Jesus required of him that morning near the charcoal fire beside the Sea of Galilee.

When Peter wrote of hope (1 Peter 1:3, 13, 21; 3:15)), it was from his own experience of that virtue. Peter knew the mercy of Christ first-hand. He had been assured that Christ prayed specifically for him (Luke 22:32). And the Resurrection angel had sent a specific reassurance to Peter (Mark 16:7), just in case the Apostle’s hope should falter. Peter’s subsequent life was based on that reassurance of the love and forgiveness of Christ.

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All Saints Orthodox Church

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
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