

What Difference Does Easter Make?

Caversham Baptist Church
8 April 2018

I want to look at six events in the life of Peter this morning, three before the tumultuous events of Easter and three after. I want to use and promote The Action Bible this morning. I think it does a great job of telling the whole biblical story while remaining faithful to the original text. It's a great resource to use with your children and grandchildren, if you're fortunate enough to have them.

The first event is one we're all familiar with: Walking on Water. (Matthew 14:22-33)

We often consider Peter a failure because Jesus had to rescue him, but I think you have to admire him for being courageous enough to step out of the boat in the first place and he did get to walk on water. The thing we need to consider from this event is that doubt is a natural part of faith. When we're surrounded by a sea of unbelief it's not surprising that sometimes we start to sink. When seemingly intelligent people around us suggest that our faith is fantasy, not reality, it's easy to be shaken. When people we care about seem to have a negative response towards anything we share about our faith in Jesus, it's easy to feel that the foundation we've built our lives on isn't as sound as we thought it was. Doubt is a natural part of faith, but if it drives us to seek answers to our nagging questions then it's part of our spiritual growth. The beauty of living in this internet age is that we can easily find answers to any questions we have because other people have wrestled with exactly the same things we're struggling with. I'd also

recommended Tim Keller's book, The Reason for God, to anyone who wants to think through some of the big issues of our time.

The next event that involved Peter is this: Mountain Vision. (Matthew 17:1-21)

A word for our young people. Peter's reaction is natural. You may have had a mountain top experience at Easter Camp last weekend. Like Peter, anyone in the middle of a mountain top experience doesn't want to come down! But nothing grows on mountain tops. Mountain top experiences help us see things we've never seen before, they inspire us, they can give us hope and prepare us for what lies ahead, but they can't last forever. Mountain top experiences are really important. Christianity has to make sense in the heart as well as the head. It's vital we experience the power of the Holy Spirit and realise how much God loves us if we're to go the distance with Jesus. Mountain top experiences are to be enjoyed and remembered, even cherished, but just like the disciples who had this amazing experience with Jesus we have to come down from the mountain and live out our faith in the real world.

The final event I want to look at before the children and teenagers go out happened on the night Jesus was betrayed: The Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-56)

When we read about the failures and shortcomings of people in the Bible we like to think that, in the same circumstances, we wouldn't behave that way. I wonder how we deny Jesus in this day and age? I wonder if, when we have opportunities to speak about our faith in Jesus and avoid it, we're actually denying Jesus. I wonder if we deny Jesus when people use his name as

a swear word and we don't say anything in response. It's so prevalent in our culture that it's worth trying to come up with some challenging or thought provoking responses.

Tongues of Fire! (Acts 2)

For the three years Peter spent as an observer and participant in the ministry of Jesus he was incredibly impulsive, he often engaged his mouth before he'd put his brain into gear, and when he was confronted by trouble in the garden of Gethsemane his first reaction was to turn to violence. When he had an opportunity to prove his allegiance to Jesus he denied he knew him, just as Jesus said he would.

His life couldn't have been more different after Jesus had risen from the dead and he'd received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter's life shows the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit. Peter spent three years hanging out with the greatest person who has ever lived. He listened to the best teaching ever uttered by a human being. He had the privilege of seeing Jesus up close in a huge variety of situations and yet time and time again he behaved in a way that was totally inappropriate for someone who identified himself as a disciple.

It's the same for us. We can go through the motions of Christianity but unless the Holy Spirit fills our lives we'll always fall short of what we could be.

So how can a person be filled with the Holy Spirit? To be clear, there is an important difference between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the filling of the Holy Spirit. All believers in

Jesus Christ have God's Spirit living within them, or dwelling within them, but not all believers lives are filled or controlled by the Spirit's power. Some people describe this distinction by saying believers have all of the Holy Spirit but the Holy Spirit may not have all of them. The Holy Spirit comes and lives within us at the time of our salvation but we are filled by him when we submit to him.

The filling of the Holy Spirit can vary in the life of each believer. Negatively, a believer in Christ can "quench" or "grieve" the Holy Spirit. Sinful actions can hinder the work of God's Spirit in our lives. In contrast, when a believer in Christ lives in obedience to God's will and commands, he or she should expect to see God's Spirit living through them.

Some suggest that the filling of the Holy Spirit is an emotional experience that takes place at certain moments, but the concept of "filling" in Scripture is one of being controlled or influenced by the Holy Spirit. At times living a Spirit-filled life may include emotional or mountain top experiences. But the idea of being filled by the Spirit is more about an ongoing sense of God's Spirit working in a person's life, not a one-time experience. As the believer lives out his or her faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit increasingly controls or fills his or her life; this leads to things like joy, thankfulness, courage and right relationships.

A New Menu (Acts 10:1-11:18)

So God uses Peter in an amazing way. From this point forward the forgiveness and new life found in Jesus is available to all people, everywhere.

Given this significant change to Peter's thinking and behaviour – that the death and resurrection of Jesus provides salvation for all who seek it - it's somewhat surprising to see what Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians.

Let's move on to a grown-ups Bible now:

Galatians 2:11-16

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

This confrontation occurred in the city of Antioch, where people were first called Christians. It was a city that had a large number of Gentile believers. Peter ate meals with these Christians on a regular basis. A Jew sharing meals with a Gentile was something that had previously been unacceptable according to Jewish tradition. However, God nullified this tradition when he told Peter in a vision that Gentiles should not be considered unclean. This acceptance of Gentile Christians was later reaffirmed during the Jerusalem Council, recorded in Acts 15.

However, when some Jews arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem, Peter gradually began to withdraw from eating with the Gentile Christians, and instead ate with the Jewish Christians. Paul said he did this because he feared these Jews, most likely because he wanted to be liked and popular. (Don't we all?)

In making this decision, Peter was guilty of several sins, and Paul called him out on them in front of everyone. As the letter says, his primary sin (as well as the other Jews who followed his lead) was that he "was not acting in line with the truth of the gospel". In other words, he was teaching a false gospel. He believed in salvation by grace, but by withdrawing from the Gentile Christians, he was showing with his actions that he believed Jewish traditions were superior. In verse 14, Paul says Peter was trying to force the Gentiles to live like Jews. In doing this, Peter was creating a divide between Jewish and Gentile Christians, thus breaking the unity of the church. He was ignoring the grace of God.

Because of this action, Paul called Peter a hypocrite. He believed one thing, but did something else. As a leader in the

church, he was to set a good example for others, but instead, his hypocritical actions led others astray and would have certainly upset the Gentile Christians. He also acted in complete opposition to the vision God had given him earlier that the Gentiles were to be considered equal to the Jews.

Paul rightly confronted and condemned Peter's sinful actions.

This is significant for us. Even with the example of Jesus to follow, even with the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit within us, we don't always get it right. We speak and behave in ways that are inconsistent with our commitment to Christ. But the mark of a true believer is that we acknowledge our sins, learn from our mistakes and grow throughout our lives.

That's why we're finishing with communion today. It's an opportunity to pause and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us about things in our lives that need to change. It's an opportunity to express our gratitude to Jesus for going through pain and suffering so that we can be put right with God. It's an opportunity to commit ourselves to God and his best purposes for us once again.

I hope you've been able to identify with some of the events from Peter's life this morning. Like all of us, he's a real mixture of good and... not so good.

I want to leave the final words this morning to him. Note especially the ones I've highlighted in yellow.

2 Peter 1:1-11

*Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour
Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:*

*²Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the
knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*

*³His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly
life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own
glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very
great and precious promises, so that through them you may
participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption
in the world caused by evil desires.*

*⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith
goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge,
self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to
perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, mutual affection;
and to mutual affection, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities
in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective
and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
⁹But whoever does not have them is short-sighted and blind,
forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.*

*¹⁰Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to
confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you
will never stumble, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into
the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*