

Peter's story: a reflection for Holy Week and Easter

by Clare Masters

PART 1

Hello, I'm Peter... previously known as Simon, but Jesus thinks I'm so strong and sure that he's given me a new name: Peter, or "Rocky", the dependable one, trusty, loyal, steadfast to the last. If you need a spot of encouragement or exhortation, I'm your man. Speak first, or better still act first... and think later. In Jesus I see the Master I've been looking for all my life, my champion, and I've laid everything at his feet. I've even left behind my fishing boats to give my life to his service. Because following him matters. What he says matters. How he cares for people matters. How he changes lives matters. And when I'm working with Jesus, I know that I matter. I feel that I am being carried forward, full of heavenly purpose. Being chosen as one of his special team of twelve gave me a sense of affirmation that I had never known before. And when I realised that I was actually part of his inner circle of just three closest friends, along with stalwart faithfuls Jim and Jack, well... I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but my heart almost burst with pride. I seized the responsibility joyfully, earnestly, full of passionate determination to be a key player in this exciting new kingdom that Jesus kept on talking about.

We cruised into Jerusalem that weekend before Passover like surfers on the crest of a wave, crowds cheering and waving palm branches. It looked like a fiesta, but secretly these palm branches were a great way of shaking a rebellious fist at the occupying army – though the steely-eyed Roman soldiers we passed hadn't got a clue. They were more twitched by the sight of Jesus on a wobbly little donkey – unable to decide if he was just taking the mick, or whether there was something more threatening going on, or even if Jesus was just in the fruitcake category.

I was full of excitement and anticipation, waiting for our great Passover celebration and a chance to enjoy some real team bonding time after many months of exhausting ministry out on the road. But as the next few days went by, Jesus became gradually more and more serious. He kept mentioning worrying things like "suffering" and "going away". To be honest it was all getting a bit disconcerting. Especially when Mary turned up after supper one evening and decanted a whole flask of lavish perfume all over Jesus... and he just looked mega thoughtful and defended her by saying she had anointed him for burial. That was too freaky by far. I didn't like that at all.

Things were looking up a little when it came to our Passover supper – at last it seemed there was some forward planning which, despite my impetuous nature, I found strangely reassuring. An upstairs room had been booked, and we all gathered in readiness for our celebrations. Judas was a bit late showing up, which was unlike him, but once we were all present and about to begin, something else weird happened. Jesus got up, took off his cloak, and wrapped a towel round his waist. We frowned – what was going on here? And then before anyone could say anything, Jesus had taken hold of the jug of washing water, and was down on his knees cleaning Jack's sweaty feet, and a moment later was washing Jim's feet too. One more step and he'd be in front of me. I leapt up in alarm – protesting, "No, Lord, you can't wash my feet" – I mean, he was our master and this was a far too horribly lowly task for him to do. But he just gazed at me with that *look*, the one that sees right down into your deepest soul, and said "But you're part of all this, aren't you?"

And so I stammered, “Well, wash me then. In fact, wash my head and my hands as well while you’re at it, because I’m really not clean enough for you at all.” Jesus just smiled, cleaned my dusty feet, very calmly, and continued round the table. We watched, silently, uncomfortably humbled and perplexed. And when Jesus had finished, he said: “Remember this example of leadership that I’ve set you”, and then took his place at the table again. I glanced sideways at Jim with my eyebrows raised in puzzled enquiry, and he scowled back. Jack was staring at his plate and wouldn’t even meet my gaze.

Soon the age-old prayers of remembrance and rescue were washing over us, and we ate... the mouth-watering taste of roast lamb contrasting with the zingy bitter herbs. Abruptly I realised it had all gone quiet. Jesus had paused at the end of the familiar rhythm of the Passover words, and was gazing thoughtfully at the flatbread in his hand. “This is my body,” he said. He tore the unleavened bread slowly in half. “Broken for you.” Then he broke the bread into smaller pieces and passed it round to each of us. We each held our little morsel, wonderingly. “Eat it”, he said, “in remembrance of me”. Each of us obediently popped our piece of bread into our respective mouths and chewed manfully. The bread stuck to the roof of my mouth, and the dryness made me feel suddenly afraid. Jesus reached forward and picked up the large goblet of wine in front of him. “And drink this”, he said, “It’s like a new covenant, my blood poured out for you.” And taking a sip himself, he passed the goblet to Jack and gestured to him to pass it on round the table. When the cup reached me, I took a big gulp of the sweet dark wine, and prayed silently for courage.

After dinner we’d usually all soon be deep in various animated conversations and discussions, but that night Jesus was strangely intense, repeatedly saying things like “Whatever happens, remember this: love each other. And although I have to go away, I will send help. And I will come back for you.”

“What do you mean, Lord?” I asked. “Can I come too? You know I’d do anything for you, I’m ready to go to prison for you, even lay down my life for you!” Perhaps my prayer for courage had been answered.

Jesus gazed at me again, with *that look*. “You can’t come, Simon,” he said, ever so gently. Why was he using my old name? “In fact, Simon, you’re going to be dreadfully tested tonight, and before the cock crows in the morning, you will have denied three times that you even know me. But I’ve prayed for you, Simon, that your faith will not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

I just stared at him. What a preposterous thing to say. But I didn’t even feel brave enough to argue.

“Right then, off we go”, announced Jesus unexpectedly. Judas had already sloped off – he’d had some muttered conversation with Jesus a little earlier at the table. The rest of us gathered up our things and wrapped our cloaks around us as we headed out into the chilly night air, wondering where Jesus was heading now. He led us to an old olive grove. The branches trailed dark shadows in the moonlight. Jesus asked the rest of the disciples to wait near the entrance, and he beckoned three of us – me, Jim and Jack – to follow him. I breathed a small sigh of relief – Jesus still considered me to be part of the inner circle after all. We were perhaps going to get some helpful team talk and a much needed debrief regarding the rather confusing events of the evening.

Wrong again. No team talk, no debrief. We wound our way through the gnarled old trees, and then Jesus stopped, asked us to wait and pray for him, and he went ahead on his own. We watched him walk on until he too stopped, and crumbled to his knees, a hazy shuddering shape in the darkness. We waited, and waited. I tried to pray. "Lord God, what's going on? Help Jesus, please. Help us. Help me."

And I think I must have dozed off, but suddenly the whole olive grove erupted with noise and torches, and there were soldiers, and a glimpse of an ashen-faced Judas embracing Jesus, and I can hardly begin to describe the horror of seeing Jesus being dragged away by the soldiers. Hearts pounding, we hesitated in the darkness, but the Romans seemed entirely disinterested in the rest of our little band, it was just Jesus they wanted. They took him in the direction of the High Priest's house – the religious authorities had had it in for Jesus right from the beginning. So eventually I skulked along at a chicken-hearted distance behind. Next to the High Priest's house was a courtyard, with a charcoal fire burning. A few of the soldiers were resting outside the main entrance, a couple of servants were going to and fro, bringing them food and drinks, and a number of other curious people were hanging about too, no doubt intrigued by the sudden flurry of night-time military activity. I was cold and scared. There was no one standing near the brazier, so I crept towards it, trying to look inconspicuous. Jesus was somewhere inside the building. I hoped he was all right.

One of the servant girls came over to collect more hot water from the cauldron dangling over the fire. I looked quickly down, casually pulling the hood of my cloak slightly across my face. "Were you with the prisoner?" she asked. I shook my head dismissively in what I hoped was an offhand kind of manner. She wandered off with her jug of hot water, and I held my breath, but she looked back at me, and then I saw her whisper something to the other servants. The hours ticked on by. I waited, with not the slightest idea of what to do next. It was nearly dawn, when a couple of the other servants came over towards the fire, looking sideways at me. "I'm sure you're one of them", said one accusingly. "No way," I muttered. "But you've got a Galilean accent" announced the other triumphantly. "I don't know what you're talking about" I said, trying to make my scared voice sound angry instead. "I don't even know the man".

They shrugged in an "OK, have it your way, we're not really fussed" kind of manner. It was quiet for a few seconds. And then the silence was broken by the sound of a condemnatory cockerel crowing, piercing the darkness, piercing my broken chicken heart. At that moment the door of the house opened and Jesus was led out. "They're taking him to Pilate," whispered one of the servants conspiratorially. Jesus' eyes met mine. I could not even hold his gaze. I dropped my head, and fled, bitter sobs bursting from my lungs.

Forget Rocky. I'm just Simon after all. Simon the chicken. All I can think of as I cower in a dark corner, trying to shake that image of Jesus' sorrowful face from my mind, is that Jesus prayed for me... that my faith would not fail, and that when I have turned back, I must strengthen my brothers.

When I have turned back ... to who?

Jesus has gone.