

# P E T E R   O N   A   C R O S S

SERIES ON MATTHEW III  
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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When it comes to torturing someone to death the worst thing for the onlooker is the smell. Especially crucifixion on a hot and humid day. After two days the flies would have made their home in the moist and open wounds, especially around the nails, and the stench of the blood starved flesh going off at the extremities of the body would be overwhelming, especially if we are talking about twenty or so crucifixions.

Let's journey back to the 1st century. Imagine a normal day that could have been a Tuesday or a Wednesday. The kind of day that just happens without being spectacular. Imagine a row of crosses with fellow Christians nailed to them. One of the crosses is different.

St Peter the apostle stubbornly opposed the command that he should be crucified upright in the same way that Jesus was. So he is easily found because he is hanging upside down, nails through his wrists, but all his weight pulling at the nail through the arch of his feet at the top. His death would be swift.

A guard looked at him in a sneering kind of way, "Well, was it worth it?"

And Peter thought for a moment in the midst of the pain shooting up and down his body. "Surely, it wasn't supposed to be this way. I didn't sign up for this." You could forgive him for thinking at that moment that Jesus was a fraud, the world he saw from his upside down perspective was not the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus had promised. This was not freedom, this was not a world full of love and hope.

As Peter hung there bleeding and counting his breaths, his life flashed before his eyes.

He saw himself sitting in his boat with his brother Andrew about thirty odd years before.

The weather was unsettled and changeable—a bit blustery, but not enough to deter a good day’s fishing. It was, he recalled, not a particularly impressive catch, but just enough to pay the bills and do some trading. They were coming into shore.

Peter noticed that there was quite a crowd gathering on the beach. They seemed to be following someone who was walking reasonably far in front.

As they drew closer they could make out the shapes of stretchers with people on them. There was a group of lepers walking noticeably separate from the crowd. Andrew said, “There’s that Jesus fellow again.”

Jesus had gained quite a following on the circuit for his style of teaching which seemed to be less about teaching the right stuff and more about teaching the truth. He was engaging and eloquent, smart and empathetic, he was a gifted story teller and knew the bible inside out. And now he was healing people left right and centre. There was nothing he couldn’t heal or fix.

It was a very exciting time, and Andrew and Peter were about to get prime seats because they were going to pull up to the shore near where Jesus was heading.

But Andrew said to his brother, “We’d better try one more time with the nets—I don’t think we’ve quite got enough for today.” Peter protested “but it’s such a good opportunity to see Jesus face to face, why don’t we just go into shore?”

Andrew replied, “because he is just another prophet that will come and go, sure he’s spectacular, but right now, we need more money to pay our bills.”

Peter grudgingly acknowledged and assisted Andrew in casting the net one more time. What would someone as famous as Jesus have to do with fishermen anyway.

As they were casting their nets they heard a shout in the distance.

“Oi.”

They turned to the voice and saw that it was Jesus calling them and frantically indicating that they needed to come in right now.

Peter smiled at Andrew, and Andrew sighed and conceded that they could finish for the day, so they drew the nets in and set back for shore.

The crowd was getting larger and forming around Jesus, they were a group of individuals vying for his attention, desperately wanting him to heal their physical wounds. But Jesus had his back to them and was smiling—it was very surreal.

When they had landed Jesus went up to the brothers and simply said, “follow me, and I will show you how to catch people.”

Peter couldn't believe his ears! “Are you serious? Of course! Um, really?” He started whooping and jumping around doing some obscure jig proclaiming to himself “Oh wow, Yes! Oh this is so good. Yes!” Jesus started laughing too.

“Come to think of it,” Peter thought as he agonised upside down on his cross, “there *was* something a little reserved about Jesus' laugh at that point.” He now understood why, as the blood oozed it's way down his arms to congeal in his armpits. A shard of pain cracked its way along his body and his head felt like it would explode any moment from the prolonged head rush. He switched off from the pain and went back to his life story. “Better to think about a life that's been and is to come, than one solitary moment called death,” he thought to himself.

Two words, “follow me” were such dramatic and life changing words. Crisis words, a crucial moment where yes or no would only do. It was an opportunity to depart from the routine and mundane existence of fishing and to do something exciting. Something defining, something educational. Being a disciple of a prophet was a tremendous thing for pop-culture. You were regarded as being holy, enlightened and devout. A conduit for God, a spokesperson who carried mana, and respect. Yes, to follow a prophet, brought privileges and esteem. Peter would no longer be a fisherman but a fulltime Christian worker! His life would never be the same again.

“Follow me” were the words that saw Peter becoming a teacher, travelling the country and even healing people! He was able to cast demons out of, he was . . . a celebrity. “Follow me,” was also a demand that started Peter down an irreversible path to the destruction of himself.

“Follow me” said Jesus, “and I will give you new meaning. I will give you purpose and drive. I will enable you to do wondrous things that will reveal truth to people! Yes, follow me, and I will make your life more than just a routine.” Beautiful words, enticing words, truthful words, but words that don't necessarily speak of prosperity and happiness. Happiness and fulfilment are not necessarily the same thing. Prosperity and satisfaction are not necessarily the same thing. Love is often painful, if it were not, would it still be love?

Jesus promised a life that would break the mould, the operative word unfortunately was break.

Over the next three years, Peter often rued the day that he said yes. He would often think about how this prophet who was going to change the world was doing it all wrong. And even when he acknowledged Jesus as being the son of God, things still didn't seem to get better they just got worse!

He remembered Jesus being betrayed by a fellow disciple, he remembered the countless death threats by the religious people, the bitterness hurled at Jesus from people who didn't get a chance to be healed, the huge political pressure for Jesus to start an army and a revolution. The violent religious discussions in the temple. But Jesus didn't seem to care about any of it. And then he was arrested, falsely charged and even though the case was thrown out of court, was all but lynched were it not for a technicality of Passover laws.

Peter mostly remembered that awful night of Jesus' trial. The night he told people he did not know Jesus. The utter sense of betrayal that he felt when the rooster crowed signalling his third denial—just like Jesus said.

Whenever Peter remembered denying his association with Jesus, his gut felt heavy. He had let his disappointment in Jesus overwhelm his commitment to him as a friend and leader. He realised how hollow his claim that Jesus was the Son of God was more of a Sunday School answer to get brownie points from Jesus than anything else. Knowing the right answers doesn't make someone's faith alive. He wanted to save face more than he wanted to acknowledge Jesus. Ouch.

It was a different day now, still a normal day that could have been a Tuesday or a Wednesday, not very interesting weather and the world was just spinning on its axis as the world does.

After the death of Jesus Peter was sitting on the same beach where three years earlier Jesus called him. He had been hearing the rumours of how Jesus body had disappeared and thought that it was time that people just got on with dealing with the disaster of their guru's demise and leave it alone to history. Jesus was dead and that's all there was to it. He sat there with his other disillusioned disciples and pondered what a waste it had been for them all. 3 years of their lives dedicated to a fraud.

Well, it wasn't as simple as that. Peter couldn't deny that they had been the toughest and best three years of his life. He was surprised at how he had been exposed by Jesus time and time again for being all talk and no action. Just like the night of the trial.

Loyalty? What did Peter know about loyalty! He thought it was being a violent protector like in the garden of Gethsemane when they came to get Jesus. Peter compared loyalty demonstrated by his sword and gallant attitude in response to military might with the gentle questions around a campfire later that week that led to a shameful personal rejection of Jesus.

“You knew him didn’t you?” asked one of the bystanders. And Peter the loyal, the rock, crumbled and said they were mistaken. “I do not know the man.” He said it hollowly, and flippantly. His trembling voice incited suspicion and instead of fobbing the questioner off, they became even more curious. Three times Peter denied that he knew Jesus. Three times.

This horrible shame stayed with him and formed the backdrop to the scene on a hill just outside the city as he witnessed from a distance Jesus crucified. He watched this man’s last breath. “It is finished” were the last words that Jesus spoke. And to Peter and the other disciples, the words rang horribly true. It *is* finished. The whole thing, the whole Jesus phenomenon was finished.

Five days later when they were sitting on the beach looking at the sea of Galilee, they took stock of where they were in their lives. And that moment they went out fishing again was the moment that they rejected Jesus once and for all.

“Let’s get on with our lives and just forget about it all. We need to get some money to live.” And off they went.

Imagine how despondent they felt when they caught nothing all day. Imagine how ripped off by life and God they felt when they tried to overcome their disappointment with Jesus and take control of their destiny again only to fail. They were supposed to be fishermen for crying out loud. It was the sting of the salt being massaged into their God-opened wounds.

They were a sorry looking lot as they turned for shore, nothing was going right.

“Oi” someone shouted from the land. “How’d you get on out there.”

“Nothing,” replied Peter with some rude words. “It really really sucked.”

“Why don’t you try the other side of the boat?” came the voice on the land. The fishermen looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“Go on, what harm would it do?”

And Peter remembers that they did, in spite of it all, in spite of being exhausted and tired of everything, they for some reason put their net out on the other side of the boat.

And suddenly their nets were full of large fish. And in the middle of all their surprise, in the middle of this bizarre incident one of the disciples yelled out “It’s Jesus!” And Peter remembered feeling so elated and overjoyed that he threw himself into the water and swam to the beach.

And when everyone in the boat came ashore there was Jesus, alive, resurrected, the Son of God. He was something completely out of the ordinary, once dead, buried and left to rot, now here alive, preparing a meal and giving life. Jesus, was serving them Barbequed fish!

But Peter harboured a deep sense of shame. All the excitement he felt about seeing Jesus was tarnished by the fingerprints of his denial. He was two faced and he knew it. At the lowest point in Jesus’ life, Peter refused to acknowledge him. I wonder if he knows?

Jesus got up and sat next to Peter and paused for a while. Peter sensed that Jesus knew because there was a certain awkwardness about the moment.

Jesus said, “Peter, do you love me more than the rest of these guys?”

Peter looked steadily in front of him so as not to make eye contact, “Come on Jesus, you know I love you.” He thought he could escape the question and carry on talking about the weather or something. It was ok, because he wouldn’t have given up three years of his life for any of those guys, and he quite *liked* them. So he must really like Jesus, simple logic.

Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”

“Ok, sure, I’ll do that for you Jesus.” Yeah, that was easy. He just has to be responsible for looking after some of Jesus’ younger followers. Teaching Sunday School was easy. You always feel superior to children . . . yeah, he could do that!

And Jesus said him, “Peter, do you love me?”

“Yeah, yeah, you know I love you. Of course.” Um, why was Jesus doing that? Why the extra question?

“Tend my sheep.” Said Jesus.

Peter could see that he was going to have to lead some home groups, lead song times or do the church lawns as well. You know something for the adults.

“Ok. I can do that for you . . .”

But then Jesus said, “Peter, do you love me?”

Peter felt like dirt—this third time was more than he could bear. And he heard the voices in his head, “Ya twofaced coward. You say one thing and do another. You are a hypocrite. You are deceitful. You are a liar. You only wanted to know Jesus when the going was good. How useful was Jesus to you after all?”

How honest was all the stuff you said? How often did you bask in the glory of importance? And where were you when the glory faded? Fame. Respect. Kudos. You are a fool if you think that these things made you worthwhile. You ran Peter. You ran from Jesus and he is asking you the big question now.”

Oh his tortured heart as he knew that three times he had denied knowing Jesus, three times he had walked away from his friend, three times he had exposed his true colours and now Jesus three times had challenged him. “I can’t do this. I can’t cope with you asking me this Jesus.”

“I gave you everything and you let me down. I gave it all up for you and you didn’t conquer. How can you expect me to love you when you left me alone? Where were you? Where were you when it all hit the fan?”

And Peter momentarily forgot the miracle of the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead and was making breakfast for them all. He couldn’t see past his own hurt, and his own self pity. And once again he was undone.

“I gave up three years of my life for you Jesus. Three years. And for what? Come on Jesus, you know that was a big commitment. You know that I wouldn’t do that for just anyone . . .

“Did you do it for me Peter, or for yourself?” There’s no such thing as a pure motive.

“I did it for, well . . .” it’s difficult to lie to the Son of God.

“Jesus, you know everything. And you know that at some point, somewhere, no matter how deep and obscure, surely you can see that I love you. I can’t see it myself most of the time, but you know Jesus, you know that I love you. It’s not much . . . but it’s there and I can’t let it go. Please help me see it too?”

And with this confession came the ring of truth. This was a new beginning.

Peter understood at this point that he wasn’t all he cracked himself up to be. He wasn’t all he thought he ought to be. He just was another person deeply broken, self serving and inadequate, unable to measure up to his own standards and unable to ever be good enough for Jesus by what he did. And at this point he desperately asked Jesus to look through all the stuff that he hated about himself, look past his ego, look past his pride, the makeshift fixes over his heart. Jesus please look beyond my inadequacy and see, see that I do love you though it’s only a small amount, I desperately wish it were more, Jesus, I do love you . . .” And Peter wept as he was humbled.

And Jesus instead of reprimanding him, instead of saying “you are exactly the fraud that have just realised, you are exactly full of puffed up pride and an inflated ego, take your humiliated self from my sight.”

No, instead Jesus said, “Feed my sheep! You now have the truth implanted firmly in your heart! Now you are ready! But be warned. You will be persecuted for knowing and living this truth. You will not find this road an easy road. You think it’s been hard? You wait till the future. You will have another opportunity to deny me Peter, and it will be an issue of life and death this time. Follow me!”

Peter hanging upside down on a cross, realised now the entirety of what Jesus meant.

Follow me, words that speak of sacrifice, words that speak of leaving something behind. Words that haunted Peter for the rest of his life. Words that began his involvement with Jesus and words repeated to bring him back in. Words of grace because we do not deserve them. God asking us to follow him? A gift, for us to be able to relate with God. There is no other way.

“Follow me” Two words that transformed the existence of a lowly fisherman into a great leader of the church. Two words that transform the lives of any who dare to do it.

And the guard who had hammered the nails and hung him up to die asked Peter in his last moment of life, “Was it worth it?”