

Releasing the Image

Homily for the 21st Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 27, 2023

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 – 1564) was in his early twenties, in 1501, when he was commissioned to create a statue representing the biblical hero of King David. He was offered a colossal block of marble which had been previously worked by two other artists, 35 and 25 years earlier. However both these artists abandoned the project after noticing imperfections in the marble's grain. Despite these flaws, Michelangelo took up the monumental challenge of carving the figure. When asked how he accomplished this masterpiece he said:

“I was releasing the image caught in the marble”.

This story came to mind as I was meditating on today’s Gospel. Jesus calls Simon to a life where he would have a name change, Simon would become Peter, the Rock. Now here is the thing I want us to explore today, just as Michelangelo was releasing the image caught in the marble to create the masterpiece that is David, so too Jesus was going to release the image caught in the marble – the Rock, and form the man who would become the first pope, St. Peter.

As we think about St Peter we will then consider how Jesus wants to do the same in you and me - releasing the image caught in the marble so as to create a masterpiece. So let’s think about the work Jesus does in Simon Peter’s life and by extension how he works in our lives.

As Jesus and the Apostles are gathered together they are in a place called Caesarea Philippi. This was on the northern border of Galilee about 23 km north of the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi was so named by Herod Philip, whose father, Herod the Great, had built a temple there. Philip took a special interest in the village and enlarged it, attaching his name to that of Caesar in honour of Emperor Tiberius. The gospels record Jesus going to Caesarea Philippi only once, possibly because it was sparsely populated and situated on the northernmost border of His travels. It was built on a huge outcrop of rock, and was a place where not only the emperor was worshiped but the Greek and Roman gods, especially the fertility god Pan. It is here in a place where the Emperor was worshipped and the popular gods of the culture Jesus asks the question, “who you say that I am”. Simon clearly knows and states you are:

“the Messiah, the anointed one whom we have been waiting for, the Son of the Living God”.

Now here is the first thing we want to consider about Simon Peter’s answer, he has revealed to him who Jesus is. Jesus says as much when declaring that:

“my Father in heaven has made this known to you”.

But notice this, although Simon Peter has answered the question theologically, because it has been revealed to him, he doesn’t yet know what this means for him personally. Over the coming years he will come to know Jesus personally as he experiences the teaching of Jesus, the trials of the Lord’s passion, his own denial of Jesus, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus and then the coming of the Holy Spirit. At Caesarea Philippi Simon Peter got his theology right, but

to enter into a relationship with Jesus - to know the meaning of who Jesus is would unfold over the rest of his life as he made sense of all his experiences in light of a deepening relationship with Jesus.

The same thing can happen with us, we can affirm theologically yes, Jesus is the Christ the son of the living God, because this is what the Church teaches. But to understand what these means relationally is to make sense of how we relate to Jesus amidst the confusion and ambiguity of living in the world; this is a much more challenging venture.

Jesus knows that this is the case for us, and as he did with Simon Peter, so too with you and me, he is patiently wanting to release the image caught in the marble.

Let's see how he does this with Simon Peter. He knows Simon Peter sincerely professes his faith in Jesus, and although this apostle has an incomplete understanding of Jesus, he can truly work with Simon Peter. Jesus takes Simon Peter where he is and sees in him the potential of who he can become. And while there is much that will need to be done to release the image caught in the rock, the marble, Jesus is going to do a work in Simon Peter where indeed he will become a man whose deep and intimate relationship with Jesus will free him to become the first pope of the Church. Jesus knew all Simon Peter's flaws, like the David marble. But as a master artist he would work in this flawed man in such a way as to create a masterpiece.

How did this happen? If you know the Gospel accounts, Simon Peter is very confident in himself, as Jesus has ordained him to lead the Church. He vows unfailing allegiance to Jesus and boastfully says that even if all the others forsake you, I will die with you. Jesus knows however that Simon Peter is not yet formed enough to follow through on his misguided promise. It will be through his failures and defeats, his inability in the face of the pressure of the world that he will be disloyal. It will be as if the influence of Caesarea Philippi – where the Emperor and the gods of this world are worshipped that he will be so intimidated and thereby deny the one he knows to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Does the same thing ever happen to you? The world presses in so aggressively that we can be intimidated and lose our trust in Jesus and wonder is he the son of the living God. Or we can be so cowed that we deny him outright. But this is the image I want to leave us with today. When Simon Peter is most defeated, what does Jesus do, he gets his attention and with his gaze he sees into the depths of Simon Peter's heart. And while this is incredibly painful for Simon Peter it is ultimately so healing too.

Think of two examples of this. On Holy Thursday when Jesus has been arrested, and Simon Peter has denied Jesus for the third time, St Luke tells us:

At that very moment, the last word hardly off his lips, a rooster crowed. Just then, the Master turned and looked at Peter. (St Luke is the only writer who mentions the Lord looked at him)

Peter remembered what the Master had said to him: “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” He went out and cried and cried and cried.¹

Then there is the scene on the beach by the Sea of Galilee after a fish breakfast, during the forty days of the Resurrection. Jesus has a heart to heart with Simon Peter and three times asks him, “Do you love me Simon, son of John?” Notice he addresses him with the same words as in today’s Gospel.

I can imagine that just as Jesus had looked at Peter on Holy Thursday with love, so too in this encounter he is looking Simon Peter in the eyes, the gaze piercing his heart. What did Simon Peter come to realize? That even though I am an imperfect stone, Jesus will never give up on me. Rather he will continue to carve away so that my weaknesses and failures become the means by which the deft sculptor can take his chisel and shape something beautiful.

And this my beloved is the point of today’s homily. Jesus doesn’t want us to just have a theological understanding of who he is, but he invites us to allow him into the recesses of our soul, to look at us with his loving and penetrating gaze, so he can release the image caught in the marble. There is a beautiful quote from Pope Benedict XVI with which I would like to conclude this homily.

“Each of you has a personal vocation, which Jesus has given you, for your own joy and sanctity. When a person is conquered by the fire of his gaze, no sacrifice seems too great to follow him and give the best of ourselves.”

Now our vocation isn’t the same as Peter’s, after all only 266 men have been called to the office of the papacy. But our vocation, whatever it may be is equally important. Why? Because what matters most isn’t the job we do, but the person we are becoming. And when like Simon Peter we allow the fire of Jesus gaze to be well, like the sculptor’s chisel and hammer, we will then want to give ourselves to Jesus every day of our lives as we come to know him and thereby better know ourselves.

The Protestant Writer Philip Yancey wrote:

“Faith means believing in advance what only makes sense in reverse.”

On that day when Jesus said “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church”, the first pope trusted these words. It would only be years later that he would realize how in his relationship with Jesus these words would be fulfilled.

May we believe the same is true with us. Wherever we are Jesus wants to release the image caught in the imperfect marble of our lives and create an immortal masterpiece that will outlast Michelangelo’s David and remarkably be even more beautiful.

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Lk 22:60–62). NavPress.