

**Second Sunday in Lent (Lent 2B) – March 1, 2015**  
**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**Peter: taking up our cross and coming to our real selves**

Reading about Peter's altercation with Jesus in today's gospel, I was reminded of the helpful terminology of "actual" self, "idealized" self, and "real" self originally developed by the psychoanalyst Karen Horney.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Horney described the perception we have of our actual self, often based on the sum total of our experiences in life—both actual events and how we have interpreted them and integrated them, or have failed to do so. For many, this perception of our actual self carries with it a sense of shame and low self-esteem. Frequently we try to offset our perceived actual self with a sense of an idealized self by setting up expectations of what we think we should be and how we hope others will perceive us. Often establishing our sense of an idealized self is a healthy form of dreaming, as when I at the age of ten—as a mediocre baseball player without a father who would coach me—thought or wished nonetheless that I was a future Ted Williams or Mickey Mantle. But as we grow older, this can become more and more a neurotic response, a way of trying to escape from our perceived actual self. At some time all this may collapse or break open, especially when we bump up against things that leave us wounded. But in those wounds can be found the grace of God.

Now when the actual self, and its flipside the idealized self, collapse, the real self can emerge. We come home to our real self and find and befriend that real self through God's grace, a grace that comes when we have become broken open, when our perceived competencies are dashed and new resiliencies are unleashed. We can then begin to adopt God's point of view about ourselves, and begin to see ourselves as God sees us, and see others as God sees them—as crooked or bent, yet as beloved children of God. This is the path of conversion to our real selves and our true callings—and it can put us in the more vulnerable position of being taken to places and situations where we would rather not go—taking up a cross, as it were.

For me personally, this process of coming to myself, or getting in touch with my real self, has come over the past several years through my realization of my faults and limitations, often through people calling me into account about all these. This has *also* been the path through which God's grace and mercy have come to me, revealing my real self as beloved of God, and good enough. And positive changes began and continue as I live more from the basis of my real self rather than from my perceived actual or idealized self. But all this has required looking at my life in a less hurried and harried manner, and with some sustained attention. And of course, I still have a long way to go.

So, what about Peter in today's gospel? Well, I see much of the same thing at work. Remember, this is Simon Bar-Jona who, when he confessed to Jesus, "You are the Messiah," we are told in Matthew's gospel that Jesus responds by giving him a new name with which Jesus then uses as a pun. "You are Peter," Jesus says—the Greek is *Petros*, or in Jesus' original Aramaic the word is *Cephas*—literally meaning a *rock*; and Jesus

adds, “and on this *petra* [meaning *bedrock* – the bedrock of this revelation that I am the Messiah, the Christ] I will build my Church.” This same Peter has just messed up, however, as we read in our gospel today. On the one hand, we encounter this stumbling and impetuous, confused and fear-driven disciple of Jesus. Recall it was Peter who, in a showboat or grandstanding kind of way, attempted to walk on the sea and began to sink. Recall it was Peter who in the presence of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus at the transfiguration, thinking the last days had arrived, impulsively suggested building three booths, or dwellings, on the mountain. Again, it was Peter who, just before the crucifixion, denied knowing Jesus three times. In today’s story it doesn’t take long for Peter to change from a Rock to a stumbling block. We see Peter getting Jesus angry by insisting Jesus was wrong in predicting his final confrontation with the authorities. And much more could be added into such a description of the perceived actual Peter.

On the other hand, it was Peter who assumed the leadership of the fledgling church and who, after Pentecost, risked his life on a number of occasions, speaking boldly and publicly of his belief in Jesus. It was also Peter, the Rock, whose strength and courage helped the young church in directing its mission beyond the Jewish community. Opposed at first to the baptism of Gentiles, Peter had the humility to admit a change of heart and then baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, even though he continued to struggle with his own Jewish conservatism (as we see in Paul’s letter to the Galatians when Paul rebuked Peter for giving way to the demands of Jewish Christians to disassociate himself from table fellowship with Gentiles). Peter eventually found his way to Rome where, in later writings, he was spoken of as having become the first Bishop of Rome—the Pope. He was martyred during the reign of Nero. Much that lies beyond and later than the Biblical story has helped to idealize Peter—Saint Peter.

But, as we observe the Biblical Peter struggle with himself, often stumble, love his Lord and then deny him again, often speaking rashly and acting impetuously, Peter’s life reminds us that Jesus did not come to save the godly and pure and strong, but to save humankind – all of us - in all our failing and falling and dying. Simon Peter was neither just the actual bumbling disciple nor the idealized pope of Rome. Rather, through the grace and mercy of God, he became his real self, a leader among others in the church—albeit a fallible leader. In the 30 or so years after his sojourn with Jesus, Peter’s leadership was marked by a humility, a real self that let other leaders such as James in Jerusalem and Paul with the Gentiles carry forth. And his leadership became most real when, as Jesus predicted, Peter the leader would eventually *be led* where he did not wish to go, taking up a cross he would rather have avoided.

So, in today’s gospel, Peter was given his first reality-basing in this direct altercation with Jesus who reminded him that the life you save is the life you lose. The life we put down or idealize, and which we then clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody including yourself. As the “actual” and “idealized” Peter fell away, it seems that the real Peter was able to express his love for God in a way that his ambitions, his fears, his unreal self were no longer at the center. Instead, his Lord became his true center. He ended up forgetting or letting go of these other unreal parts of himself and giving of his real self so that, on one level, there should have been less of him than

there was to start with. Yet, paradoxically, there ended up being more, because now it was real and authentic, his true nature, his Christ nature. The experience of following the Lord even unto his own martyrdom enabled Peter at last to really be himself, as he took up the very cross he had earlier denied Jesus would encounter. So, like Peter, let's get real, knowing that the One who calls us to "take up our cross" is the One who has gone, and still goes with us, to the cross—and beyond. And let's not forget, as my former Bishop, Barbara Harris, used to say, that "The Power behind us is greater than any challenge ahead of us."<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Karen Horney, Neurosis and Human Growth (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1950). See also Bernard J. Paris, "Karen Horney's Vision of the Self" in *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Vol. 59, June 1999), pp. 157-166.

<sup>ii</sup> The Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris, sermons preached at the Diocesan Conventions of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, November 3, 1997 and November 1, 2002.