

Why did Peter join others gathered around the fire? He had followed at a distance and could have remained apart. Despite the heat of the day, it would be quite cold at night, hence the kindling of a fire in the courtyard. The people that Peter followed back to the priest's house would have included those in the arresting party, as well as the inevitable onlookers wanting to see the apparent downfall of someone whose message they feared and perhaps the exciting prospect of a stoning. Although Peter was mortally afraid he had the courage to follow in order to see what was happening to his master. Perhaps he joined the others around the fire, not to warm himself, but to blend in. He may have thought that if he had stood apart he may then have attracted more attention and increased the risk that he would be unmasked.

Of course, he was recognised, in fact three times in all, just as Jesus had prophesied. We can imagine his denials, the first quite definite, perhaps even too strong "Woman I do not know him", the second, stronger, "Man, I am not!" This would be louder and his fear must have shown on his face. The third denial, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" was clearly a shouted, hysterical denial, his face full of fearful anger.

Then, exactly as Jesus had told him it would, the cock crowed. Jesus looked at him. Their eyes met. The full realisation of his denial, his remembrance of all his fervent protestations to Jesus that he would never deny him – struck him hard in the solar plexus.

All of his pent-up fear and anger drained from him. He ran away in a flood of uncontrollable, sobbing tears. We can feel his desolation and remorse.

For me, the song "Je ne regret rien" has never expressed a realistic sentiment for followers of Christ. We constantly fall off the narrow path, sometimes in significant ways that mar Christ's image in us and also in small, seemingly trivial ways. We feel remorse, our conscience pricks us.

Are there times when we blend in by nodding agreement with others whose views we should oppose or stay silent because we fear to challenge them openly and possibly create a difficult atmosphere? Probably. Do we sometimes “go with the popular flow” when our faith tells us we should do the opposite, perhaps even simply to avoid appearing odd, too soft-hearted or naïve? Do we keep quiet when someone we know expresses views, for example about refugees, which are counter to Christ’s teaching?

For Peter, not blending in risked arrest, violence and death. His fear had been building over the previous days. He had seen Jesus in agony of spirit in Gethsemane, witnessed the betrayal by Judas, the arrest of Jesus by soldiers and must have felt the atmosphere of HATE when they reached the high priest’s house. His fear must have become almost a physical pain. His earlier, heartfelt, confident insurances that he would never deny or betray his friend Jesus were forgotten in that fear. We can surely empathise with Peter.

Luke tells us that “The Lord turned and looked at Peter” What sort of look was it? Certainly not one of accusation or even disappointment. God is full of compassion so I’m sure that Peter saw compassion in the face of God in Jesus.

Jesus knew that Peter could not at that time suffer as he did. Was the bitter shame that Peter felt at that point enough to make him willing to suffer death by acknowledging his Saviour? No, he ran away. Peter had witnessed Jesus perform miracles, even raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. He had witnessed His transfiguration. He had declared his belief that Jesus was the Messiah. But before the crucifixion, dying and resurrection of Jesus, perhaps Peter and none of the other disciples really understood what it all meant. From our perspective, what would have been the point of Peter acknowledging Jesus if that would not enable Jesus to be released, even if he had been able to overcome his fear? We can understand personal sacrifice to save another but not sacrifice for its own sake. Jesus must have known this. There would be no condemnation in his face. Ultimately, through the gift of faith Peter was able to suffer a terrible death in Rome as a witness for Christ, but that was in the

knowledge and complete acceptance of his faith in Christ's resurrection and His redeeming power.

When we say, "I belong to Christ, I submit to Christ, I turn to Christ", do we fully understand what we are doing? Like Peter we want to respond to Christ's loving invitation, his message of redemption for each of us and the world. We are unlikely to be tested as Peter was tested but we can examine the depth or otherwise of our commitment to those promises. The power of Peter's story of denial can focus our minds on our own faith. My faith varies in its intensity, often luke-warm, at times only stirred by adversity or the selfless or inspirational actions of others. We cannot will our own faith but must listen for the invitation from our Saviour each time we remember his life, death and rising to new life. To bring God's kingdom here on earth, we must "run the race", persevere even when we doubt or feel hopeless. Only by God's grace can we do that.

Peter was redeemed by his faith and preaching the good news of Christ's salvation for all people led him to death on the cross.

I have never had to fear physical violence for telling someone that I am a follower of Jesus and cannot know how I would respond if I were. My immediate thought is that I might say anything to avoid pain. On the other hand would I put myself in danger to save or help a friend. I hope so. Would my faith in Christ give me courage that I would otherwise not have? I trust so. In any event, we can actively look to Christ to guide us to help others even if it puts us out of our comfort zone, causes us embarrassment, simple inconvenience, financial or emotional cost or to suffer disapproval, mockery or even rejection. Measuring my own faith against those criteria is a humbling experience and reinforces our need to support one another in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Peter's ultimate sacrificial faith arose both from his life with his friend and guide Jesus and from his direct experience of His appearance to all the disciples when he was raised from the dead. We can't have that direct

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experience, we have to drink in the story, let it settle and use it to examine our own faith. Although some experience a “road to Damascus” transformation, I suspect that for most of us, our growth in faith is a slow journey, with some backward steps, stumbles and then perhaps further growth through the regular revisiting of the Easter message, our contact with those who guide us, those who show us Christ’s face in acts of kindness and personal sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit within us, guiding us on our way.