

Rocky Road: Rocky By Name, Rocky By Nature - Sunday 3rd March 2024

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[0 : 00] We are going through this Rocky Road series. So with that name in mind, I thought this morning, what better excuse than to watch one of the finest moments of movie magic with Rocky himself on a little training run that he takes through the streets of Philadelphia.

So this might inspire you for park run next week or something. We'll see. Hey, look at Rocky.

Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky, you better put it down this time.

Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky. Hey, Rocky. Yeah.

Come on.

Come on. Hey.

[1 : 27] Oh, my God.

Oh, my God.

Oh, yeah. Oh, my God.

Oh, my God. This charismatic boxer inspiring a bunch of kids to follow in his footsteps. Now, we don't know if Jesus' disciple Peter was a boxing fan.

I suspect he could handle himself. We told at one point he cut someone's ear off, so he could obviously put himself about a bit. But I could imagine Peter perhaps being just as charismatic a character as the Italian stallion himself.

[3 : 21] You know, as Dave helped us unpack a few weeks ago, when Jesus was calling his disciples, Peter was one of his first recruits. Peter's younger brother, Andrew, bringing Peter to see Jesus.

And it's in the meeting between Jesus and Peter that this rocky stuff for Peter emerges because Peter's birth name was actually Simon.

And we're told this, that Jesus looked at him and said, you are Simon, the son of John, but you will be called Cephas, which translated means Peter.

Peter, so Simon, son of John, might call him Simon Johnson or something today. He's given a new name by Jesus. Now, the name Simon means listen or hearing.

And he certainly seemed to hear the call of Jesus on his life. But Jesus says, no, you're going to do more than just hear. You're going to do more than just listen. In fact, let's reflect that in a new name.

[4 : 23] I'm going to call you Cephas, which is an Aramaic name, which when translated into Greek is Peter. And Peter means rock. And that's why we imagine perhaps Peter was called Rocky himself, even.

So Peter, the rock, Johnson, it was a rock solid enough figure for Jesus to entrust him with the future of his early church.

But as we've seen over recent weeks and as we'll see again, Peter was somewhat rocky by nature as well, wavering between moments of brilliance and moments of bewilderment.

His journey of faith was indeed a rocky road. Now, one thing that Ian mentioned the other week was that most pictures of Peter that we see show him as a pretty old man.

Even when he was with Jesus in person, Ian showed us some stained glass windows of scenes of Jesus with Peter. And Peter's a senior citizen in these stained glass windows, at least.

[5 : 29] Indeed, in most images of Peter that we see, he's normally shown in his senior years, sometimes bald as a coot, sometimes with a knife head of hair. He worked that one out if he had a mopped up or not.

But he's shown in his older years. Now, why might that be the case? Well, although Peter was probably only in his 20s when he was with Jesus, there is a hint that he's the eldest of all of Jesus'

12 disciples.

For example, have a little look at this passage from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 17. After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?

Yes, he does, he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak.

What do you think, Simon? he asked. From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes? From their own children or from others? From others, Peter answered.

[6 : 50] Then the children are exempt, Jesus said to him. But so that we may not cause offence, go to the lake and throw out your line.

Take the first fish you catch, open its mouth, and you will find a four drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.

It's quite a random little story, isn't it, really? Peter gets asked by some tax collectors if Jesus pays the temple tax.

It's the annual tax every worshipper over the age of 20 had to pay to help support the work of the temple in Jerusalem. And Peter says, yeah, yeah, he does pay that tax.

But then after a chat with Jesus about paying taxes, Jesus then tells him to go fishing. Take the first fish he catches, and he'll find a four drachma coin in its mouth.

[7 : 53] Jesus says this, take it and give it to them, the tax collectors, for my tax and yours. And that's where the story ends. We're not told if Peter actually does go fishing at this point.

You know, I'd have been straight out there, I think, because a four drachma coin was worth about 200 quid in today's money. So it's worth a punt sticking a line out, I imagine. But what's more, the most common fish in the Sea of Galilee at the time was a tilapia.

A tilapia. It's about a foot-long fish that often digs around the bottom of the lake. And I gather it's called a bottom feeder. Is that right, Mickey? Is that what? Yeah, technical term there.

Excellent. A bottom feeding kind of fish. So for fish like that to swallow a coin that's been lost in the bottom of the sea, about the size of a 10 pence piece in our day, it's not beyond the realms of possibility.

Leaving aside, though, the sort of fishing and how Jesus knew that a fish might have a coin in its mouth and so on, what's interesting, I think, in this is that Jesus says the coin is to pay for my tax and yours, Peter.

[9 : 01] You see, we're told elsewhere that Jesus was about 30, but here we see Peter must have been at least 20 himself since he has to pay the tax too.

And yet because Jesus only mentions him and Peter needing to pay the tax, it kind of implies that the other disciples would have all been under 20.

Otherwise, they'd have been liable to stump up this drachma coin too. All of which means, I think, that Peter, probably this 20-something disciple, is the eldest out of all the disciples.

And the rest of the disciples were probably no more than teenagers themselves with Jesus. Now, the fact that Jesus mainly calls teenagers to be key players in his kingdom, that's worth reflecting on another time, maybe.

But for Peter, it seems, therefore, he's the kind of big brother figure, not just to Andrew, his blood brother, but to all of the disciples.

[10 : 09] As the eldest, Peter's been around the block for a bit more than they have. He's someone they perhaps look up to, someone who maybe feels, even takes on more of a leadership kind of role of their group.

Yes, Jesus is top dog. He's teacher. He's the rabbi. But Peter would seem to be the kind of assistant almost, like the shop steward perhaps, the spokesman on behalf of the others.

All of which I think, if Peter is the eldest disciple, helps to flesh out why, therefore, it was Peter who was the one to step out of the boat when Jesus is walking on water.

He's the one who takes the lead from the others. Explains perhaps why Peter is the one to kick up a fuss about Jesus washing his feet. You know, I'm the senior one here. What are you washing my feet for?

And it also explains perhaps why Peter is the one who answers on behalf of all of the disciples when Jesus asks who they think he is. You know, Peter is this kind of rocky figure running just in front of the others, it seems, striking out ahead, setting the tone of how to follow Jesus.

[11 : 22] Now, I don't know if this aspect of Peter's character is something that we can identify with, that you can relate to. You know, having a role or a position that other people look up to or follow.

I guess whether we think of ourselves as any kind of leader or not, all of us, in whatever life stage or place we're at, there will always be people who look up to us, even if we're not perhaps aware of it. And as with Peter's case, I think this is probably especially true in terms of age and what often comes with that. You know, experience, wisdom, perspective, the ability to overcome mistakes and keep going and so on.

Yes, I know, getting older, growing old, has its downsides. I've started to trim my ear hair at the moment. That's how old I'm getting, I tell you. Have a little sneaky peek next week if you want, see how I'm doing.

Older, it's not all roses, I know, getting there. But at the same time, actually, every day, every month, every year we go through, what a privilege it is to be able to live in ways and hopefully with qualities that those younger than us, whether a year or two or decades or more, will be absorbing and learning from, even emulating.

[12 : 44] I think Kim was saying it earlier, that she's grateful that it's an all-age kind of church. And I think we genuinely are all ages here because, for example, you know, the 80-somethings in our midst, the ones that I know are amongst the kindest, most encouraging, most inspirational folks among us.

Equally, I know how much some of our shooting stars look up to the superstars, for example. And there's loads of other good stuff going on in between those two kind of ages.

Yeah, we can be inspired by and appreciate folks of all ages, but I think there is something important about the way that those with a few more miles on the clock, shall we say, can inspire and encourage us in our life and faith.

And so I wonder, for you, thinking about this, I wonder who you might make a point of seeking out for wisdom and experience with whatever you're facing, someone who's just a bit further on in life than you.

Equally, who might you be able to encourage and offer support to as they face perhaps some things that you've already had to go through, you know, that receive it and then pay it forward perhaps to the next generation.

[14 : 05] If we think about Peter, he was maybe, what, five, ten years younger than Jesus, but then five, maybe even ten years older than the youngest of the disciples.

Now, I love it that Peter would have taken his lead from Jesus, just a bit older than him and his wisdom, but then also been able to help pass that lead on and give a steer to those younger than himself.

Indeed, by way of example, let's take a look at an episode which I think underlines this leading role of Peter's from John's Gospel.

But before we get to Peter's role in this little story, a bit of background to this because in the run-up to what we'll look at, Jesus has recently, miraculously fed the 5,000 with just a few loaves and fish. And he's obviously gained a lot more followers because of that. People like a free lunch, if nothing else, and they thought maybe there's more to come of that with Jesus, I'm sure. But Jesus says, no, look, it's not just about me meeting your physical needs with actual bread.

[15 : 15] No, I am the bread of life. Feed on me. Consume my teaching. Let my ways nourish and shape the way you live.

It says this, I am the bread of life. Anyone who comes to me will never go hungry. After he says this though, Jesus goes on to explain that he and his teaching, you know, his ways are not just good, but they're divine.

They're from heaven. Satan saying this, he says, yeah, I am the living bread that came down from heaven. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Now, 2,000 years later, we might understand perhaps that Jesus is talking about the way he'll give his life so that death can be defeated in order that we might truly live.

And we remember and we celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection by eating bread and drinking wine at communion, you know, symbols of his body and blood.

[16 : 25] But for some of the early followers of Jesus, it was clearly, you know, all a bit much for some of them because we're told many in the crowd were grumbling about Jesus and arguing about how he could possibly have come from heaven.

At one point, they sort of say, as if you've come from heaven, Jesus, we know your mum and dad. It's not going to be possible, is it? We know where you're from. You know, come on, Jesus. And then it's almost as if they're saying, you giving us your life for our life.

You know, we're already alive. How can that possibly be the case? You know, we're happy as we are. Thank you. Just, you know, you do your thing and we'll go our way. And so with people beginning to turn their backs on Jesus, here's how John's gospel picks up the thread after this in chapter 6, a little clip of that.

He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. On hearing it, many of his disciples said, this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?

[17 : 41] The Spirit gives life. The flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you, they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.

For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.

From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. You do not want to leave too, do you?

Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.

Jesus asked the twelve, you don't want to leave too, do you? And who is it who pipes up first in response? Yeah, as we saw, it's Peter with these words.

[18 : 49] Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. He's the kind of senior spokesman, it seems, on behalf of the we, the disciples.

And for all of his faults, all of his ups and downs, I think Peter gets it here. He gets it. If not you, Jesus, then who?

Who can compare? Who else can possibly give us the love, the meaning, the hope, the life that comes with you? It's not for the twelve disciples that Jesus' teaching and ways weren't challenging.

Nah, not at all. But here, Peter, on behalf of them all, basically says, yeah, life is tough and life is confusing at times. But you, you are the truth, Jesus.

And that means that this tough and confusing life can only make sense with you, not without you. again, I suspect we can probably identify with this episode of Peter's experience with Jesus.

[19 : 57] Indeed, the wavering and the weighing up from a lot of his disciples. In fact, I wonder what you'd say, for example, is the toughest thing you find about being a person of faith.

faith. What is it about following Jesus that you find most difficult to do or to make sense of? For example, I guess it could be for some of us that the call to forgive those who wrong us is the toughest thing we're asked to do.

It might be the command to be generous with our money in sacrificial ways. It could be the challenge of believing in a loving God while seeing so much suffering in the world or even in our own lives.

It could be the idea of Jesus, you know, this man, actually being God. And God is therefore far more personal, far more grounded, far more peace-loving but actually far more radical than perhaps we sometimes feel comfortable with.

Equally though, I wonder what is it that means people turn back as some of Jesus' followers did from fully following today?

[21 : 21] So that could be life pressures, could be illness, distractions, could be despair, you know, things which almost you can almost feel it sometimes squeezing the spirit out of us at times, you know, all very understandable, if so, the pressures that so many are under.

Could be disillusionment that stops us following Jesus with the church, you know, as an institution perhaps, or the way that we've been treated in some places in that the walk that we've seen doesn't perhaps match the talk and so we seek community and meaning elsewhere.

Again, all very understandable reasons, I think, if so. Going back to the idea of Jesus being far more radical than people are perhaps comfortable with, I wonder if some of us become less inclined to follow Jesus wholeheartedly because we find, say, his radical inclusion of people too much to cope with.

So the idea that Jesus might just be calling us to rethink long-held views on sexuality or gender, on salvation and judgment or on other faiths, you know, maybe that challenge feels a step too far for us sometimes, even though sticking with what we've always known means we might not always be keeping pace with where Jesus might long to lead us.

I suspect there's all these reasons and more as to why people stop following Jesus and maybe some of these reasons resonate or tie in with the things that you find hardest about living a life of faith as well.

[23 : 12] Now, following Jesus it's not easy, it's not straightforward but then would it be worth it if it was? Peter didn't know what he answers.

He certainly argued with Jesus, he disagreed with him, he got things right and he got things wrong but when asked by Jesus if he wanted to walk away Peter was able to say, Lord, to whom shall we go?

I don't get it all but I know you've got the words of eternal life. all of which I'd suggest perhaps provides the context for one final little clip for today.

This time from Matthew's gospel at what was probably the lowest point in Peter's life. We're not going to leave him there but let's take a look at a time when on the night before Jesus was crucified Peter was challenged about whether or not he knew Jesus.

Have a look of this. Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard and a servant girl came to him. You also were with Jesus of Galilee she said but he denied it before them all.

[24 : 22] I don't know what you're talking about he said. Then he went out to the gateway where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there this fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth he denied it again with an oath I don't know the man.

After a little while those standing there went up to Peter and said surely you are one of them your accent gives you away. Then he began to call down curses and he swore to them I don't know the man.

Immediately a rooster crowed then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken. Before the rooster crows you will disown me three times and he went outside and wept bitterly.

You see that weeping at the end there bitter tears from Peter they're pretty revealing I think you see Peter's been criticized over the years for disowning Jesus at his hour of need it's one of the most famous things about Peter it seems and I guess at our best or at our most cocky we might imagine ourselves being more willing to stand up for Jesus than Peter manages here and yet knowing Peter knowing his flawed humanity you know his relatively young years and young faith the weight of the responsibility he felt not just to Jesus but also as this senior disciple I think primarily we do well to empathize with how conflicted how scared how confused Peter must have felt yes he denies knowing Jesus three times just as Jesus who knew him best predicted he would but the tears at the end there you know they seem to me to be tears not just of regret but of desperation the one who he declared as the son of

God the one he knew as his first and foremost the one he'd followed all this way to the courtyard on the night is now about to die so no wonder he's not thinking straight no wonder he's feeling utterly lost and scared for his own life in every sense but therein I'd suggest lies the beauty of Peter and I'd suggest of Jesus also so in Peter we see someone who sometimes sets the bar so high as a follower of Jesus that we can't fail to be impressed you know someone whose faith and energy whose passion and willingness to put Jesus first it's inspiring but we also see in him someone who gets it horribly wrong on occasions too so wrong that he denies even knowing Jesus at the worst possible time but if I look at my life maybe if you look at yours isn't Peter all of us really the ups and downs and isn't it brilliant that the gospel writers include the story of

[27 : 38] Peter warts and all you know they don't polish him up they include his best bits and they certainly include his worst bits seems to me following Jesus is not always about getting it right following Jesus is knowing that when we get it wrong even when we deny Jesus Jesus will never give up on us and I think deep down despite his tears Peter knew this because just three days later it's Peter who runs to the empty tomb first when he gets news that the crucified Jesus has come back to life he's still hanging around he's still there he's still keen he still knows that Jesus is the one but we also see not just with Peter but we see in Jesus that Jesus never gives up on Peter either and over the next couple of weeks in this story Ruth and then Ian will unpack the stories of the resurrected

Jesus meeting Peter on a beach up in Galilee but there's a little detail in Luke's gospel which is just worth pointing out before that it's a detail which comes in the account of how the newly risen Jesus appeared on Easter Sunday to two travelling companions on the road to Emmaus so we're told this that having met with Jesus these two they got up and they returned at once to Jerusalem there they found the disciples and those with them assembled together and saying it is true the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon who's Simon well it's Simon Peter the apostle Paul he backs up this report in his first letter to the Corinthians when he says too that yeah Jesus was raised on the third day and he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve so when these two come back from that Emmaus encounter with Jesus the other disciples hadn't yet seen the risen Jesus that would come just after that in this same room but before that general appearance Jesus had evidently sought out a special one-to-one with Peter now frustratingly we're not giving any details about that meeting between Jesus and Peter it's not a gospel reading it's just hinted at here but it's a meeting which must have taken place earlier on Easter Sunday itself maybe even as Peter made his way back from seeing the empty tomb but this kind of private meeting between Jesus and Peter I think we can say it's a testimony to how highly regarded Peter was by Jesus how much he wanted him to know that despite his denials Jesus hadn't given up on him you get special treatment indeed Jesus would never let him go and that to me is perhaps the best life lesson from Peter of all and as we've seen as we'll see over the next couple of weeks

Peter's life was a testimony to the love of Jesus a love which remained constant despite the rockiest of roads that Peter himself travelled and I guess my prayer for me my prayer for you is that we take that assurance of Jesus' eternal love for Peter and for us to heart as we make our own ways through life doing our best in the power of the spirit on our own rocky roads to follow Jesus the one who calls each of us by name Amen Amen Amen