

Rocky Road: The Calling of Peter - Sunday 4th February 2024

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Preacher: Dave Moss

[0 : 00] For those who don't know me, my name's Dave and I'm about to start this series on Rocky Road, Life Lessons from Peter, which we're looking at during February and March.

This morning, we're going to look at the calling of Peter. So, I don't know how your week's been, but I presume that on Friday, you took down your Christmas decorations.

Because that's the tradition, you should be taking your Christmas decorations down on the 2nd of February. However, I've got a sneaking feeling that some of you may have done it a little earlier than that.

Perhaps you got fed up of them because you put them up in November. Well, the late Queen Elizabeth II didn't take her decorations down until the 6th of February.

And we'll wait to see if King Charles has done the same thing. But for the Queen, it was for a special reason. As that was the date her father died and she ascended to the throne.

[1 : 12] But the decorations stayed up, fitting in with what is the more accepted Christian tradition, to leave them up until the 2nd of February.

Most of us will be familiar with taking down the Christmas decorations on 12th night, the 5th, 6th of January, on the eve of Epiphany. That's the end of the 12 days of the Christmas celebrations.

And this is the day when we're supposed to celebrate the visit of the three wise men and carry out popular Epiphany customs like Epiphany singing, chalking the door, having your house blessed, consuming the three kings cake, and winter swimming, as well as attending church services.

It's customary for Christians to remove their Christmas decorations on Epiphany Eve, which is 12th night. And in times past, to take them down before then would mean that life would not go well for you in the coming year.

So be warned if you've been naughty. The reality of today is that most Christmas trees are in the bin by then. And although, as you can see in the top right there, at least in some areas of London, some partry traditions survive still for 12th night.

[2 : 41] In other countries, the tradition is not to take the Christmas decorations down until the end of the Epiphany season, which is on the 2nd of February, at Candlemas.

And Candlemas celebrates the presentation of Jesus at the temple. This is a great reason for a good procession of lighted candles and eating lots of delicious filled crepe.

And whatever you do, don't take down the nativity scene you've got in your house until this date. Because again, if you do, that's not a good sign for the coming year.

So as I'm sure you're aware, we've now completely lost all this tradition in this country. And why is this? Well, going back to the Industrial Revolution, the idea of all these feast days and holidays and celebrating and partying were not popular with employers.

They needed people to be in a good frame of mind and most importantly, back at work five to six days a week to keep business going and the money coming in.

- [3 : 54] So, the thought of a longer period of celebrations did not fit in with this at all. There was simply no time for Twelfth Night or Candlemas.
- So it was back to work, everyone. And that's what we've got today, isn't it? Because we're told that the economy is the most important thing.
- We must keep it growing. And obviously, if you're not at work, we can't keep it growing. And we hear this so often that I think we actually believe it. We actually believe that's the most important thing.
- And now, this has become the very purpose of our lives. Keep the economy going and all will be well. The result is that everyone, by early January, is back working at full steam and the thoughts of rest and celebration are already a distant memory.
- In this country, most of us are aware, I think, that we are now working more and more hours. But the problem is that does not appear to be having any economic benefits, just more stress and anxiety.
- [5 : 05] No wonder we talk about the January blues. But the January blues kind of feeling suits our current culture very well.
- Because, you see, we don't need to feel blue. Because our culture has got the answer. Because what we need is Easter eggs.
- That's what we need. We need Easter eggs. We need a nice meal in a restaurant. Or a new car. Or go to the garden centre. Or the DIY and get a home sorted out.
- Or get fit. Or why not book a holiday? Because you need a holiday after all. Well, that's because we went back to work too early, didn't we? And what about that spa day?
- You deserve it. Is this really all for our benefit? Or is it just another way to get our money off us to keep the economy going? I hope you can see that this is now what we have become.
- [6 : 09] This is what we've become. And it's a million miles away from Epiphany or Candlemas. And suddenly we find ourselves doing this editing down, cutting out, rushing through everything in life so that we can move on to the next thing.
- And we suddenly find ourselves all consumed by the prevailing culture. Exhausted. With no time to reflect or draw breath.
- So here we are. Just after Candlemas. Here at St. John's. About to look at the life of the disciple Peter.
- One of Jesus' followers. Over seven weeks. We've got seven weeks of this. Right? What do we need seven weeks for? Can't we just move on?
- And, you know, get it over with? I mean, it's really quite easy, isn't it? You know, Simon ended up being called Peter, which means rock. And then he messed up. And he denied Jesus three times.
- [7 : 11] But Jesus reinstated him after his resurrection. And then Peter became the first pope. And that's why we've got St. Peter's Square in the Vatican in Rome. That's it, really?
- Done. So I've saved you seven weeks. There you go. This is what our culture does to us, isn't it? We move on so quickly to the next thing.
- And then we think we know about something. And we think we understand. But actually, we've got no time for the winter celebrations. We don't really need winter in our lives.
- We want to get on to summer. Summer is everything. When it isn't even yet spring. Let's listen and understand a bit more.
- One day, as Jesus was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.

[8 : 10] He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore.

Then he sat down and told the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, Simon, put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.

Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them.

And they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man.

[9 : 21] For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken. And so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid.

From now on, you will fish for people. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. We learn that Simon, also called Simon Peter, is a fisherman.

Perhaps someone older than the rest. He had a fishing business with his partners, James and John. They would have already heard about Jesus and some of his teachings.

Jesus was out there, moving in the peripheries of their lives, and not some remote character who suddenly appeared one day. They would have known about him. And what Jesus does is he comes to these fishermen and to the heart of their very fishing business.

He relates to them. He asks permission to use their boat. And he shows he needs them and teaches people from their boat.

[10 : 50] The practical reasons for the boat, too. Because everyone would have seen him in the boat if he was there. And the surrounding landscape forms like a natural amphitheater. And it's good for acoustics.

So sitting in the boat and addressing the people on the shore would have been good to do. But that's not all. For Jesus shows how much he understands the fishing business.

And he affirms them. He knows that they rely on a good catch. And sees that they've had a bad day. He's a person of his word.

A person to be trusted. And he knows they've worked hard. And have caught nothing. But he bids them to trust him.

And so they recast their nets. And the catch is absolutely mega. More than they can actually handle.

[11 : 48] It's really great news. Because the profits will soar. It's growth time for the fishing business. The fishing business is on the up.

The economy is going to boom. And this is what they've worked for. Simon Peter will now have enough income to get his own gym membership. To send his mother-in-law on a spa break.

And to book that well-deserved holiday. Because that's how life works, isn't it? Well, not a bit of it. Not a bit of it.

You see, Simon Peter is overcome. And falls at Jesus' knees and says, Go away from me, Lord.

I am a sinful man. He recognizes for the first time who Jesus really is. God's unique servant.

[12 : 46] And then, of course, for the first time, Simon Peter realizes who he, who he himself really is. And that he falls short.

He's overcome with his own unworthiness in Jesus' presence. You see, that's what happens when Jesus shows up.

We hear of him. We tend to know what he stands for. But are we prepared to meet with him? To allow him to get to know us?

To really know us? And are we prepared to see ourselves as we really are? This is an intimate relationship.

Jesus knows that Simon Peter feels inadequate. Not up to the mark. But he shows Simon Peter compassion, understanding, and grace.

[13 : 50] Jesus accepts him and knows what Simon Peter can become. Something, as we shall see in the coming weeks, Jesus never loses sight of.

He calls Simon Peter to relate with him. To come alongside him. To strive with him. We make so much of Jesus being this leader that we end up setting him apart.

He's over there. He's in front. He's way up ahead of us. But he is the one to work with. To relate to. This wasn't some quick get up and run away moment so Jesus can make you a better person.

But rather, Simon Peter, I know exactly who you are. And I like you. I love you. And what's more, I need you to come and work alongside of me.

Jesus explains that he's asking Simon Peter to come and catch men. And the word used for catch here is not used in the sense of trapping people.

[15 : 05] So you go, okay then, I'll become a Christian. It's not used to trap people. It's catching people with the meaning of restoring them to life.

That's the meaning. This is precisely the good news of God's kingdom. Restoring people to life. It's not a quick fix kind of job.

But one that requires patience and perseverance. And often with no tangible results. Because this is exactly what Simon Peter has been learning as a fisherman.

You don't always get the catch you want. And this is precisely why Jesus is asking him to come alongside him. Jesus knows the qualities and gifts that Simon Peter has.

I've been enjoying this book by Richard Harris recently published. And it takes paintings from the royal palaces and matches them with comments on the life of Jesus made by the Queen in her Christmas addresses over the years.

[16 : 15] So this one by Caravaggio is called The Calling of Saints Peter and Andrew. It hangs in one of the bed chambers at Hampton Court Palace.

And it's thought to have been painted between 1601 and 1606. You can actually see a copy of it if you go down the road from here to Western Park. There's a copy of it there.

And it was painted at a time when few people could read. And so the impact of a painting as a visual medium was quite something.

And again I think in our modern culture we often look at something like this as a visual impact. And think it's a bit gloomy isn't it? A bit dark. I don't think I'd have that in my lounge. You know that's the kind of thing we do.

And we just miss the whole point. Here then, so Caravaggio, the light picks up on what Caravaggio wants us to focus on. So namely the hands of the three figures and their faces.

[17 : 20] The hands of Jesus are slender and elegant and point forward where he wants Peter and Andrew to follow. In one hand Peter is holding a fish while the other is a strong fisherman's hand.

And the hand of Andrew points at himself in surprise. Do you mean me? The faces of Peter and Andrew look startled.

Peter is portrayed as much older, half balding, half bearded. And that in itself gives a powerful message that you're never too old to be asked to work alongside Jesus.

And I don't think we think of the people in the 17th century as being radical and controversial. But we have it here. Because the face of Jesus is beardless and feminine.

And the slender hands contrasts so dramatically with the hands of the fisherman. And there's a shapely neck and white sash giving a strong spiritual allure.

[18 : 42] It has intimacy which says, You are the people I care about. Follow me. In Matt's series on salvation, and if you haven't heard the series, then I strongly recommend you listen to them on catch up on YouTube.

We've learned so much. There is indeed much to ruminate on and work through. But here, in the story of Peter's calling, is a good illustration of how we superficially understand what is meant by salvation.

We can easily think that what Jesus is doing here is calling Peter to be saved from his old sinful life, a sort of call to conversion. When in fact, it's nothing of the kind.

Peter indeed says, Go away from me, Lord. I'm a sinful man. Because he's so aware that he regularly messes up and needs help. Something, as we shall see in the coming weeks, that never actually goes away.

He's very good at it. But what we see here is the start, the start of Peter's relationship with Jesus. The start of a relationship of love and trust, which helps Peter's work through the consequences of sin and all that it brings.

[20 : 12] This encounter sets him on a path for a new kind of life. It quite literally sees him walk alongside Jesus as a trusted friend and partner.

But what's even more interesting, I think, is that at this point, he doesn't know what he's saved for. What he's called for.

Jesus calls it catching people. But what on earth does that mean? And it's a complete mystery to Peter at this point. He doesn't know.

But it's based on trust. Trust. Trust. Trust. Trust in a Jesus who knows Peter, knows his flaws, and knows his fears.

Trust in a Jesus who believes in him. Trust in a Jesus who, in turn, so trusts him for who he is. And what is more, wants him to come and work alongside him.

[21 : 15] We can too easily be the ones left on the shore. Doing the DIY, keeping fit, booking the next holiday, eating our chocolate eggs, enjoying the spa day, and keeping the economy growing.

We can too easily be the ones left on the shore. Just listening to Jesus, enjoying the talk, singing the songs, enjoying the atmosphere, sharing the group vibe.

But getting up, and coming to Jesus, and then deciding to follow, well, that's quite a different matter. So when Jesus calls us to follow him, it's exactly the same.

It's with the purpose of building a relationship of love and trust. Jesus does not demand everything from us because he's already given everything of himself to us.

He does not demand everything from us because he's already given everything that we need himself. But he does ask us to trust and to build that relationship.

[22 : 30] A relationship where we can find forgiveness. A relationship where we can experience grace. A relationship when we can find acceptance for who we are.

A relationship where we're valued for who we are. You're not called to be a cog in an industrial machine.

A name on the list of the saved. You're called because you're wanted. Because you're needed.

Because you're loved. You're called. You're wanted. You're loved. Spring comes after winter.

It'll take a while before we get to summer. And let's be honest, most people never get to summer. As we hear the voice of God in the songs of songs, see, the winter is past.

[23 : 37] The rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth. The season of singing has come. The cooing of doves is heard in our land.

The fig tree forms its early fruit. The blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise. Come, my darling.

My beautiful one. Come with me. Let us pray. Lord, help us to understand that you wish to build a relationship with us.

Because we're wanted. Because we're needed. Because we're loved. And it may be winter.

But spring is not far. See, the winter is past. The rains are over and gone.

[24 : 48] Flowers appear on the earth. The season of singing has come. The cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit.

The blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise. Come, my darling. My beautiful one. Come with me.

Let's just sit in a period of quiet. And I'll leave the words on the screen. Let's just sit in a period of quiet. Let's just sit in a period of quiet. And I'll leave the words on the screen.