

May 4, 2025 – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: Acts 9.1-6, John 21.1-19

Did you already see the movie 'Conclave'? If not, I would definitely recommend to see it, even if its ending is not to everyone's liking, as I happen to know. At the end of this week, the real conclave will be in full swing. The Church of England may have sidelined the bishop of Rome as its highest ecclesiastical authority ever since the Act of Supremacy of 1534. But the pope still is undeniably the most important Christian figurehead in today's world. And when we are lucky, as with the late pope Francis, he is a strong voice for the faith and the Christian values that we all share, despite of our denominational variety. So it is only natural, also for us, to pray for the Holy Spirit to guide all those cardinals to make the right choice for what in the tradition of the church is called the successor of Saint Peter.

Isn't it very fitting to have such a direct link between the pope and Peter? Despite all the pomp and circumstance in which some popes, unlike pope Francis, have revelled during the centuries, despite that highly problematic dogma of the pope's so called infallibility, the Gospel stories related to Peter remind us that the rock on which Jesus chose to build his church was a very ordinary fisherman from Galilee. A man of action rather than of contemplation, personified here by that other disciple, the one 'whom Jesus loved'. We could perhaps even say that Peter tended to act in a rather impulsive way as he shows in this story by immediately jumping into the water when he realises that it is the Lord who is standing there on the shore. Perhaps in his great joy to meet Jesus he even forgot for a moment that there was still some unfinished business to be settled between the two of them. It is the story of his threefold denial, that shows us Peter's fallibility. The fact that, just like all of us, he is in constant need of God's forgiveness, of Christ's grace and mercy, which he receives in such a special and personal way in today's Gospel at his so called restoration by Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus, whom we know better as St Paul, was equally in need of Christ's forgiveness, in need of a turning around or conversion of his ways when he met Jesus. An event that set him on his course to become a great apostle and saint, just like Peter. Therefore it is fitting on this Sunday to hear both of their stories. One of the major differences between these two meetings with Jesus is that in Peter's case the resurrected Lord could still be met in a very real, physical way, as it took place before his ascension into heaven. They see him standing on the shore of the lake, hear him starting a conversation with them. He causes another miraculous catch of fish as at Peter's first calling, strangely enough not recorded by John, but by Luke only.

He prepares and shares a simple meal of bread and fish with his disciples, and he has a special conversation with Peter. But it is clear that Christ has already changed or been transformed somehow as, just like with Mary Magdelene before, the disciples do not immediately recognise him and the whole atmosphere is very different.

Paul's meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, taking place after his ascension, is of course even more different. He sees a blinding light from heaven and hears a voice speaking to him. But the effects of the meeting are just as profound and the clarity of what is to be

done is just as big for Paul as it was for Peter. Both of them are restored in the sense that they are profoundly touched by the grace, mercy and unconditional love of Christ. This spurs both men into action. To do something completely different from what they had done before meeting him. Peter may have planned to go back to his former life as a fisherman in Galilee after those three special years on the road with Jesus. But he was clearly commissioned here to do something else. To fulfil his earlier calling to become the rock on which Christ would build his church, taking care of and feeding the sheep of the good shepherd. And Paul stopped persecuting Christians and began his great works of mission, evangelism and church planting as we would now call it. According to the tradition they both ended up in Rome, finishing their fruitful lives as Christian martyrs.

These two wonderful stories show us how the risen Lord both before and after his ascension into heaven, remained accessible for us human beings. How he carries on with his mission, fulfilling the will of his Father, in the past twenty centuries, in the present and in the future, until the end of times. And so we can still meet Christ in our times and places, and turn to him with all our sorrows and our joys. With the wounds and regrets we carry from the past, to receive his healing and merciful touch. With the many dilemmas and choices we face in the present and all our hopes for the future. To receive his guidance and hear his call upon us. Inspiring and energizing us to act in his name. And so we are also able to catch glimpses of his ongoing loving presence among us, especially when we share that love with those around us and when we come to his church and serve it in whatever way. Our conversions and commissions may be less spectacular than those of St Peter and St Paul, but in God's eyes they are all equally meaningful and part of his ongoing purpose for us and for the world as a whole.

As we begin this new week in Eastertide, let us therefore try to stay as close as we can to our risen Lord. Let us continue to look for ways to meet him and to answer his amazing grace by living out the values of his kingdom in our words and deeds. Amen