

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 10, 2014

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Life has its ups and downs, victories and defeats. And we have an expression we use to comment on a variety of situations. “Two steps forward and one back.” Or sometimes it is one step forward and *two* back! The expression covers the art of making a cake or making gains in your investment portfolio.

Two steps forward and one back could be applied to Saint Peter in the Gospels. The Gospels and the Church are both unthinkable without Peter. Protestants try to understand him as comic relief at the side of the stage. But the Great Physician of Souls never does this! In the Gospels we can see Our Blessed Lord Jesus bringing Peter along, and declaring His Church will be built upon Peter’s faith. Jesus instructs Peter, “Strengthen your brethren.” Peter is taken aside by the Resurrected Lord and told solemnly three times, “Feed my sheep.” So it is a grotesque distortion of both the Gospels and Christ’s Church to consider either without Saint Peter’s crucial role.

Yes indeed, Peter could often use our phrase “one step forward and two back.” The difference is that *his* journey is played out in the pages of the world’s best-selling book! Before we read about that post-Easter morning breakfast by the seashore we may well wonder how it will all work out. But deep inside Peter the issue was never in doubt. Along the way only the Lord Jesus knows this. But *it is what Christ knows* that is decisive for Peter and for each of us.

So Saint Peter comes across as very human in the pages of the New Testament. How very much like us he is! We *learn* from our mistakes, and even when it comes out badly, hopefully deep down *the motive* at least was right. In any one who follows Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, in the history of love and friendship with the Master it is that *love* and *fervor* rather than any pre-existing resolves, impeccable credentials, or character traits that are the important working ingredients. Sainthood always begins with extremely human and fallible personalities. Saints eventually have built into them holy character and steadfast resolve through Love. But none of the holiness is there either at the outset or along much of the way. The automobile bumper sticker that says, “Be patient, God isn’t through with me yet” is good theology! Saint Peter didn’t have a car. But in the Gospels it is a recurrent fact that in every incident recorded about Peter, his failings

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and impulsiveness are the very steppingstones to deeper faith and commitment. Like all saints, and all disciples, Peter is seen to mature through his testings and failings.

Saint Peter may have been brash in asking Jesus to make him walk on water. But the Skilled Doctor of Souls said, “*Come.*” So Peter set out. And Scripture is quite clear the apostle *did indeed walk on water*. But as a result, Peter began to be full of himself, and so began to sink. That would be a recurrent theme in his life and a pattern in the lives of many other Christian disciples as well. Full of ourselves we begin to sink.

But in Peter there was always this wonderful love and fierce loyalty to Jesus undergirding the current problem. So in the very act of sinking, a deeper wellspring of faith emerged. *For the very first time* Peter called out directly to Jesus as the One he knows can save him. And that is the heart of the story!

Peter lost faith when he began to sink. Good riddance! It was a *false* faith he lost. And what came next was permanent faith. No longer did Peter think, “God has left me.” Instead, he cried out, “Lord, save me.” None of us can ever go wrong with that prayer! To onlookers Peter may have looked very foolish in his latest predicament. It looked very much like one step forward and two back, or maybe *two down!* To Davy Jones’ locker! That is as the world sees. But the Lord Jesus knew His man! Jesus had said “*Come*” and brought Peter through failure to the cry of true faith. Upon this kind of rock-like faith in Peter the Lord Jesus declared He would build His Church.