

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
August 23, 2020

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The Gospel you have just heard is called “St Peter’s confession of faith.” Speaking on behalf of the twelve disciples, Peter is the first ever to proclaim about Jesus: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Peter gives the *only correct answer* to the question Jesus asked. In 1st Century Palestine there were all sorts of other answers, just as there are now. Some of these were held with great conviction and sincerity. But conviction and sincerity alone do not get you to the head of the class!

It is possible for a conviction to be sincerely wrong. You can sincerely mis-read a train schedule and arrive too late for your departure, or even arrive at the *wrong destination*. There is the story of an old man who would wake up coughing at night, pad his way into his bathroom without turning on the light, and reach for a bottle of cough medicine at the end of the middle shelf in the medicine cabinet, swallow some of the syrup, and go back to bed. He did that almost nightly. Then one day his cleaning lady rearranged the medicine cabinet. That night, without turning on the light, the old man reached for the cough medicine in its familiar place on the shelf. But he drank *cleaning fluid* instead! And they found him dead on the bathroom floor in the morning. He didn’t mean to die. He sincerely believed he was correct in drinking cough syrup. But he died anyway. Sincerity is not enough. And just as sincerity may allow you to board the wrong train and end up in Buffalo rather than Philadelphia, so the wrong destination can affect eternal salvation. *We all want to end up in the right place.*

So that brings us back to St Peter. Why does Peter matter so much? The answer is quite simple: *Peter matters to Our Lord Jesus*. That means without Peter it is less than Christianity. There is certainly no good news believing at His Ascension into Heaven Our Lord Jesus simply left everything to chance! Christ promised the Holy Spirit to guide and guard and lead His Church into all truth. *But how are we to know?* We deserve the truth. Where is the guarantee Christ’s Church would not stray from the straight and narrow path the Lord Jesus described as leading to eternal life? You and I know how easy it is to stray!

So again: how are we to know? The answer is: the unity of the Church was secured against error by one man with one voice. The Church is one because Christ is One.

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And the single, clear, voice of the Church must continue to be that of one man whose voice can be identified with the authority of Jesus Christ Himself.

None of this is speculation! Nor is it a recent discovery! We can identify this one man in the pages of the New Testament. It is Simon Peter, whose name occurs some sixty times in the four gospels (as compared with the runner-up twenty-five times.) Peter is invariably the spokesman for the rest and takes the initiative in a crisis. Peter alone is set apart by the Lord Jesus as holding a unique position. And then after Pentecost, Peter figured so prominently in the early days of the Church that the first twelve chapters of *The Acts of the Apostles* are often called “The Acts of Peter.” Peter is everywhere taking the lead, everywhere the hero. He is appealed to, or challenged to change his view. And that right of appeal and challenge continues down to our very day.

Today’s gospel passage forms one part of that evidence for St Peter’s special place. And it is hard to image St Matthew the Evangelist inserting this passage into his gospel account if in fact belief in Peter’s special position was not *already* the established belief of the Church. Peter’s confession is there because it happened that way. St Matthew was not inventing or promoting Peter! The gospel was stating what everyone knew to be true.

On a recent Sunday we had another gospel passage about Peter trying to walk on water and nearly drowning! Nearly drowning is the part we remember, and conclude Peter was being brash and foolish. But Christ had invited Peter and said “Come.” And what followed brought Peter’s heart to his voice with those wonderful words: “Lord, save me.” Those words should never be very far from anybody’s lips. Remember: only one answer is correct. There is only One Who can save. The Son of God knew what He was doing. He did not make mistakes, not with Peter, and not with you and me. And in the end, it will be as He says.