

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity  
August 9, 2020

+

We sometimes say “one step forward and two back.” If we say this frequently it is because the expression is good for a variety of circumstances. It might describe the success and failures of baking a cake, or investing in the stock market. Hopefully more of the time it is *two* steps forward and *one* back, not the other way round.

That expression could be used by Saint Peter as he is portrayed in the Gospels. The New Testament, and the Church are *unthinkable* without Peter. Protestants try to explain Peter as comic relief at the side of the stage. But the Blessed Lord Jesus never did this. For all to see, Our Lord is seen bringing Peter along, declaring His Church will be built upon Peter’s faith. Peter is told by Jesus to strengthen his brethren. Peter is taken aside by Jesus at the Easter breakfast on the beach and told solemnly, not once but three times, “feed my sheep.” It is a grotesque distortion of the Gospels and the Church founded by Christ to consider either without Peter’s crucial role.

But for Peter, growing into that role was a road of ups and downs. He could say “one step forward and two back.” And his experience did not happen in private, but is described in the pages of the world’s best-selling book! For Jesus, the end result was never in doubt. If only the Lord knew this along the way, it is also true that *what Christ knows* is decisive for Peter, and for each one of us.

In the pages of the New Testament St Peter comes across as a very human person. How very much like us he is! We learn from our mistakes, and even when our actions come out badly, hopefully deep down at least the motive was right. In any follower of Jesus, the love and fervor of the disciple, rather than any pre-existing resolves or impeccable character traits, must decide the final and lasting impression. Holy character and steadfast resolve are built in disciples by Divine Love. There may not be much of either at the outset or along the way. Sainthood always begins with extremely human and fallible personalities. The bumper sticker that reads: “Be patient; God isn’t through with me yet” just happens to be good theology!

This was certainly true for St Peter in the Gospels. It is a recurrent fact that in every account about Peter, his failings and impulsiveness are the very

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity  
August 9, 2020

+

steppingstones to deeper faith and commitment. Like all saints, and like all disciples, Peter is seen to mature through the testings and failings he experienced.

In asking Jesus to allow him the capacity to walk on water, Peter was being very brash. But remember, *the Lord agreed to the request*. And so Peter set out, and Scripture is quite clear the apostle did indeed walk on water! But when Peter began to be full of himself he 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 a wonderful love and fierce loyalty to Jesus. That love and loyalty undergirded the surface problems in his personality. So in the very act of near-drowning, a deeper wellspring of faith manifested itself. For the first time, Peter called out directly to Jesus as *the One he knew can save him*. Go right there! That is the heart of the incident and why it is remembered in the Gospels.

If Peter lost faith when he began to sink, it was a *false faith* he lost. And what came next was a *permanent faith*. Peter didn't think "God has left me." Instead, Peter cried, "Lord, save me." None of us can ever go wrong with that! It may have seemed like one step forward and two back *in the world's eyes*. But the Lord Jesus knew His man! Jesus had said "Come." Come to what? Jesus brought Peter through failure to the cry of true faith. And on this kind of rock-like faith in Peter, the Lord would build His Church.