

## Peter After Pentecost – prepared by Dr Sophia Errey

Traditionally, SS Peter and Paul are celebrated on the same day, 29<sup>th</sup> June. While the first part of Acts has many accounts of Peter's mission, the later chapters focus on Paul.

Immediately after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter stands forth as a bold leader, in marked contrast to his former confusion. After his powerful preaching to the gathered crowd

*Acts 2:41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

Among these "signs and wonders" we read already in Acts 3 of the healing of a lame beggar who was asking for alms at the Beautiful Gate, the entryway from which ascent to the Temple was made. (Interestingly, a long tradition held that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem by this gate, as indeed Jesus did).

*4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.*

This is one of the scenes in Raphael's cartoons for the Sistine Chapel tapestries.



Raphael Cartoon, The Healing of the Lame Man 1515 – 16  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

As a result of this Peter and John were seized and brought before the Sanhedrin, but were released with a warning. After more healings (see below) they were again arrested and imprisoned, but were released by an angel (5: 19-20). Acts Chapter 12 records an even more dramatic intervention. Around 43 AD Herod killed James, John's brother, and arrested Peter.

*12 :5 While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. 6 The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists.*

This scene – with its contrast of darkness and light, the bewildered apostle and the release from captivity, was a popular one with artists. Raphael painted it strikingly in 1514 the Stanza di Eliodoro in the Vatican – notice his masterly handling of the different light sources.



Many artists emphasize the shackles which have fallen from Peter's wrists, as in this painting by Ribera (1639)



Perhaps the most unusual example is that by Dutch artist Pieter Neefs the Elder, painted two years before Ribera's relatively simple composition, where Peter is directed out of a prison setting of the artist's own time.



In Acts Ch 10 we read of Peter's vision of the sheet full of animals, teaching him that the Gospel was for all, not only Jews who carefully observed the dietary laws.

*10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*

This too was a popular theme for artists – who, after all, were among the Gentiles to whom the Message was to be directed! On the left is a version by Domenico Fetti (1619) and on the right a modern window from St Peter's, Nottingham.



In 1423 a wealthy Florentine, Felice Brancacci, commissioned the decoration of a chapel which now bears his name in S. Maria della Carmine, near the Arno. He hired Masolino for the painting. Masolino was accompanied by his 21 year old assistant, Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone, known as Masaccio ("Clumsy Tom"). When Masolino was called to work in Hungary the younger artist took over. However, the work was not completed when Masaccio himself went to Rome to work, and died there, probably of the plague, at just 26.

The Brancacci Chapel is generally regarded as the masterpiece of the early Renaissance, due to Masaccio's astonishingly innovative and powerful work. The subjects are drawn from the life of St Peter. One of the narrow panels on the end wall is based on Acts 5,

*5:14 Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, 15 so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by.*

while on the other side we see St Peter baptizing new believers.



Masaccio and Masolino both worked on the moving account of Peter's raising of Tabitha.

*36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." 39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.*



According to tradition, Peter asked to be crucified upside down, considering himself unworthy to be executed in the same manner as his Master. Caravaggio's intense realism provides a powerful and disturbing image of this scene. (1601)

