

## IAN PATON'S CONSECRATION

*Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go. (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God).  
John 21:18-19*

*In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen*

If the purpose of a Christian's life is to be made holy; to be emptied of self and become a saint; and if it is believed that even bishops can be sanctified; then it is worth meditating on how that might actually come to pass. That's what I'd like to explore in this address. And I want to use today's gospel as a way into the process, because it captures the spectrum or spread of human nature in a concise and concentrated way.

There are three characters in the story: Jesus the Constant Lover and Unfailing Forgiver, Peter the Boastful Deserter, and the silent but compelling figure known as the Beloved Disciple. I want to suggest that between the Beloved Disciple and Saint Peter there stretches the range of human nature in all its psychological and spiritual diversity. And if we look closely and honestly, we'll find ourselves located somewhere along the grid that separates these two extremes. But it is important to understand that where we find ourselves is not something we are responsible for. It is a fact of nature or inheritance, like our height or the colour of our eyes: it is what we are given to be. The adventure of our sanctification lies in how we respond to who we are; or, in psychological language, how we stop denying it and start the process of owning and integrating it.

The spectrum of human nature I am trying to describe stretches from the Self-Forgetful to the Self-Absorbed. I'm going to give each of these fixed points a name from today's gospel, and the name I give to the overwhelmingly self-absorbed personality is Peter, after the boastful chief of the Apostles. Peter exemplifies a type of personality – often found in successful men – that is very conscious of itself and craves attention and approval because, in its soul, it is filled with self-loathing.

I don't have to rehearse Peter's history to this assembly, except to telegraph the main theme: boastful assertions of loyalty followed by desertion and self-desolation. Christian tradition tells us that this pattern

wasn't healed by Jesus' restoration of him in the encounter we have just listened to, hinted at in the words of my text about his death. To the very end of his life Peter struggled with a self that constantly sabotaged its own best ideals. What never failed was Jesus' love for him through all his desertions.

According to tradition, Peter was an old man in Rome when the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the fire that was destroying the city, and ordered their persecution. Again, Peter deserted. As he trudged away from the burning city did he remember his denials that awful night thirty-three years before? And did he hear the cock crow as he reached the edge of the city? This time we are told he saw Jesus walking towards him. *Where are you going lord? I am going to Rome to be crucified again.* Again, Peter burst into tears, but this time he went back to Rome and death. And an old legend says that, because of his lifetime of desertions, when the moment came he asked to be crucified upside down. That has an authentic touch of the old Petrine swagger to it. Notice that it took him till the moment of his death to get it right, to finally surrender his noisy self. But if that is the time it takes, that is the time the forgiving patience of Jesus gives us.

Let me turn to the other end of the spectrum and the opposite type of human personality exemplified there, the self-forgetful or self-forgotten. If Peter represents self-absorption and self-sabotage, the Beloved Disciple represents the absolute opposite. He is almost not there, so-uninterested in himself is he, so available only for others. What we get from him is a sense of dynamic silence or magnetic self-effacement. But don't forget, that he was the only male disciple found at the foot of the cross with the women, when all the big, noisy, self-important men had run away.

I wonder where you would place yourself on this spectrum: emptied of self like the Beloved Disciple or overflowing with self-interest like Peter? Is your path to holiness the way of the self-forgotten or the way of the self that has to be surrendered, even if it takes the rest of your life to achieve it?

And where would I place Ian on the spectrum? I have been watching Ian since I met him at the Mission to Oxford University in Lent 1989. I would place him mid-way on the spectrum between the Beloved Disciple and Saint Peter. Ian is a contemplative, a man with a rich hinterland of silence and the poetry that comes only from silence. He knows how to wait; how to sit still like the Beloved Disciple.

But you can't be Rector of Old St Paul's for twenty-one years without a large element of Peter in your make-up. You couldn't do high mass there without it. It's a liturgy that draws attention to itself and calls for high performance skills in the celebrant. What fascinated me about Ian's ministry is that he took a Petrine liturgy to the foot of the cross to stand with the Beloved Disciple and the women who represented the despised and rejected of the earth. Too often in Christian history, the Blessed Sacrament has been used as an instrument of rejection, a weapon of exclusion. In Ian's time, High Mass at Old St Paul's became a sacrament of inclusive love; a place where the rejected found a role and the despised a home. I believe that is what he will do as the Bishop of St Andrews. Through the ministry of self-giving, self-emptying love, he will bring people to the foot of the cross to stand alongside those the world – and too often the Church – chooses to ignore.

But let's face it, being a bishop is a very Petrine affair. That's why it can be fun. It is also why it is a spiritually perilous role to undertake. It draws attention to itself by the way it dresses and by the boastful claims it sometimes makes for itself. That's why I can't see the Beloved Disciple in a mitre, while I can easily see Peter in a Three-Decker.

Beloved Ian, in a minute you will submit to the Petrine moment as you are ordained to the office and work of a bishop. You will be given symbols of your office that are designed to attract attention, to get looked at. Enjoy that moment. It's the fun part of this day. And fun is part of the episcopal deal. But as you submit to the Petrine moment, turn your inner gaze on the Beloved Disciple who holds the world's pain at the foot of the cross. And in the constant love of Jesus, in your episcopate bring your people to stand there with you.

Now Ian, let's get that mitre on you, and we'll leave the rest to Jesus.

Amen