

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Apr 21st 2017

“What do we learn from Peter the Athlete?”

If there is one dominant figure in today’s readings, it is the figure of Peter. We see him fishing, swimming, eating, undergoing arrest, and testifying on trial. This is a big liturgical day for the Rock of the Church!

So what do we learn about Peter? For my 11-year-old son/reflection consultant, we learn that he is first and foremost an athlete. “Dad, Peter must have been a good athlete. He jumps in the water and swims 100 yards to shore. He hauls a huge net of 153 fish up the shoreline ALL BY HIMSELF! And didn’t he cut off the soldier’s ear in the Garden of Gethsemane?” (This is what happens when your child reads the Action Bible!)

But my son may be on to something here. The Greek root of the word “athlete” is askesis, a term most often associated with our English words “asceticism” and “discipline.” And discipline in turn shares etymological roots with the word “disciple.” So what do we learn from Peter as a disciple? I find it striking that Peter encounters the Lord in the midst of his mundane, ordinary work as a fisherman. Unlike many desert ascetics, he does not cling to heroic individualism but allows his friends to accompany him. Nor does he immediately find fulfillment, undergoing what can only be characterized as a long, dark night of the (fisherman’s) soul. After a fruitless night, he also shows willingness to take advice and change course, even when he doesn’t wholly understand or recognize what is going on.

Most of all, as a disciple Peter is always seeking his Master. He swims to Jesus; he drags fish to Jesus; he allows Jesus to feed him breakfast; he heals in the salvific name of Jesus. As we near the end of the 8-day Easter Octave, may we experience more fully Peter’s joy in following the Lord. It’s time to jump in the sea.

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