

Peter's Wife – the woman we never quite meet

Sermon by Silvia Purdie,
(for Mother's Day 2016, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Christchurch)

Who is the most important mother in the Bible?

(congregational responses included Mary, obviously, also Eve, Sarah, and hopefully various other Biblical mothers)

I want to introduce to you today a woman who you have probably never heard of, who I believe is one of the most important mothers in the Bible, but who is always just out of sight. I have had a long obsession with this hidden woman, and been fascinated to gradually uncover more and more of her story, and how important she must have been in the early church. Telling her story will take us through various Bible readings, and in the process will take us through the whole length of the New Testament, the astonishing story of the birth of the church and its incredible spread across nations and cultures.

Readings:

Reading 1: Mark 1:29-34

Reading 2: Mark 2:1-5

Reading 3: Mark 9:33-37

Reading 4: Galatians 2:11-15

Reading 5: 1 Corinthians 9:5

Reading 6: 2 Timothy 4:19-22

Reading 7: 1 Peter 3:3-4

The woman is Peter's wife.

Our story begins in a town by the lake. Capernaum, in Roman, in Hebrew the village of Nahum. This was a town of fisherfolk, a market for produce from surrounding farms. The Romans opened up new trade routes, and dried sardines from Capernaum were eaten in the best homes in Rome. Peter and his wife probably grew up together there; after they married, both families shared a large house built around a central courtyard. Single story house, with a flat roof made of mud & straw packed around the beams, strong enough to stand on, but also soft enough to rip a hole in if you tried hard enough.

I hope to visit this house next year, as I hope to go to Israel and see it for myself. I'm told that there's a church and a visitors centre built over it, and you can look down through glass floor into the octagonal stone church built 1700 years ago on top of a house which had already been enlarged several times, which was for many many years a significant base for the church in Israel – this house near the shore of Lake Galilee.

The first time we almost meet Peter's wife is the first time she met Jesus. Her mother was sick, a nasty fever that had definitely got beyond a joke and was becoming very worrying. Peter came home for lunch after church, with his brother Andrew, and the Zebedee twins, as he normally did, but this time they brought someone new, a homeless teacher called Jesus.

Reading 1: Mark 1:29-34

That extraordinary day changed Peter's wife's life forever. The previous day she was a young married woman, possibly pregnant, settled into a life of cleaning and drying fish. The following day her husband left her, setting off with this extraordinary homeless teacher, wandering all around Gallilee. Peter got to travel with Jesus, became best friends with Jesus. But what about his wife? What about her? What was it like at home while both her husband and her brother-in-law had abandoned their responsibilities to be with Jesus. All very well for him to respond to Jesus' call to Follow Me. But what about his wife at home with the baby?

I felt her situation keenly while I was myself a young mother. I struggled with the tension between a call to ministry and the daily demands of caring for small children. Then I realized that Peter was never away for long. Their home in Capernaum became the home base for Jesus' ministry. They'd go off for trips and then come back. I guess Peter and Andrew would check in on how the fishing business was going.

Let's hear about some of the things that happened in that house. As you hear each story can you look sideways at the young woman and mother whose house this was, whose child this was. Can you catch a glimpse of how she might have responded to these events happening in her home:

Reading 2: Mark 2:1-5

Reading 3: Mark 9:33-37

And so it went on for 3 years.

With Jesus so often in her house, Peter's wife must have herself had a close friendship with him. She heard the teaching, she saw the miracles. How she must have loved him also. ... and so, like the others, been deeply upset by his determination to go to Jerusalem, his talk of dying on a cross. The gospel writers tell us that many women came with him that Passover week and witnessed his crucifixion. We can reasonably assume that Peter's wife was one of them. We can reasonably assume that she would also have met the risen Jesus.

So, what then? The incredible years with Jesus were over, but something else was beginning. Next week we celebrate Pentecost. Peter, together with his wife and children, was in Jerusalem with all the other Jesus-followers, for the Jewish festival of Pentecost¹. That morning the Holy Spirit fell on them all, and it looked for all the world like they were each on fire!

I think that must have been one of the most incredible days in Peter's wife's life. Two things happened which completely changed everything. One was the Holy Spirit. ... I wonder if you have ever felt the Holy Spirit come on you. Maybe you're had a small touch of it, like a whisper or a warm glow, or a feather-light touch. I have known these. But I've also felt the Spirit more intensely, with a peace that pushes all else aside, an energy that makes your pulse race, a joy that makes you want to sing or shout or just draw deep aside into God's presence. That day, after so many centuries in which no one experienced the Spirit of God directly, the Spirit

¹ Acts 2:7 says that they were mostly Galileans; Acts 2:1 says they were "all together", and several references indicated that women and children were there, so it is reasonable to assume that this would have included Peter's own family.

opened like a flood and poured out so powerfully on those who opened themselves to it that they were literally glowing with it.

The second thing was that her brash uneducated fisherman husband began to speak. For the first time in his life he stood up in front of a crowd, and before her eyes he stood a foot taller and found a voice he'd never had before, a voice of a preacher, a voice of authority, leadership, opening scripture, convincing a crowd. Wow!

(My husband likes to repeat the saying:

“Behind every great man is a surprised mother-in-law!”)

For the next 16 years Peter and his family lead the church in Jerusalem, while still keeping their home & fishing business in Capernaum. Peter travelled a bit, mainly in Israel, building up young leaders, teaching about Jesus.² Lots of incredible things happened, including Peter's realization that the good news and the Spirit were not just for Jews but for all ... but Peter still wanted non-Jews to get circumcised and become Jewish Christians.³

The next big day happened in the year 49. In 49, the church held a meeting. The church has always held meetings. This one we call the Jerusalem Council. This crazy missionary guy called Paul came and told them about how non-Jews were becoming Christians all over the Roman empire. There was a big argument lasting several days, but in the end Peter lead the council in deciding that the non-Jewish Christians did not have to get circumcised, they did not have to become Jews, they did not have to keep the Jewish law. It was a huge decision for the church.

After that the book of Acts doesn't mention Peter any more. But he pops up, along with his wife, in several other places in the Bible. It's just hard to spot because from then on he is called by his name in Aramaic language. Remember the he started out as Simon (in Hebrew), then became Peter (in Greek) which means 'Rock', which is what Jesus called him. But 'Rock' in Aramaic (which most people spoke in normal conversation) was 'Cephas'.

Here he is, a long way from home, in Galatians 2:11

Reading 4: Galatians 2:11-15

Antioch is in Turkey, 480 kms away to the north, as far away from here as Queenstown.

Pic3: Antioch

Tradition tells us that Peter was based in Antioch for several years, as their first Bishop, establishing the church in Turkey.

Peter (Cephas) must have also been to Corinth, because he was one of those credited with starting the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12). Corinth is way, way further. 1,300kms from Jerusalem, at least one dangerous boat journey, and lots of overland. From Christchurch 1300kms gets you to the Treaty grounds at Waitangi, far far to the north of here. Weeks of travelling without cars and planes.

pic4: Corinth

² For example, Acts 9:38.

³ Acts 10 & 11 describe Peter's revelation about Gentiles.

It may be that, again, Peter's wife got left behind while he was galavanting around the known world for the sake of the Gospel. But for one fascinating comment by Paul that gives us a very different picture.

In his letter to the church in Corinth Paul is justifying himself against claims that he has used them. He says, I never asked for money for myself, though I had the right to. I've always paid my own way, he says. The apostles, he writes, do have the right to be fed. They do have the right to be supported. They do have the right to travel with their wife if they want to

Reading 5: 1 Corinthians 9:5

like Peter does, he says.

As Peter does.

When I read this I was so excited. Peter's wife didn't get left behind after all! She travelled with him. She shared in the work of planting the church across many cultures, in many places. How amazing.

And yet she is never mentioned by name. Or is she?

About 10 years after the Jerusalem Council, somewhere about the year 59, Peter (and presumably his wife also) arrived in Rome.

pic5: Rome

Even further from home, yet another dangerous boat journey past Corinth, from Greece across to Italy. Peter is of course called by the Catholic Church the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope, the founder of the church in Rome. Actually by the late 50s there were already several house churches in Rome. Unfortunately for Peter, he didn't have many years there. In 64 there was a terrible fire in Rome, and the utterly mad sociopathic emperor Nero was desperate for someone to blame. He picked the Christians, and had several of them killed as a scapegoat. He had Peter killed, and several other key leaders of the church.

But the church in Rome continued to thrive, despite opposition and persecutions. With Peter and the other leaders dead, who led the church? Who do you think might have held things together and sustained the life of the church through those difficult years?

Paul also ended up in Rome, but for those years he was under house arrest. His last letter before he too was executed by the Emperor, in 67, was 2nd Timothy. In this he complains about how everyone has abandoned him, everyone except for 4 people that he names right at the end of his letter.

Reading 6: 2 Timothy 4:19-22

Greetings, he writes, from Eubulus, Pudens, Linus and Claudia. Linus became the next Bishop of Rome, though he would have been quite a young man at that time. Claudia was his mother, obviously a key leader in her own right. And Pudens? Pudens is a nick-name meaning 'Modest'. Could be either a man or a woman. Could this, perhaps, could this be the name of Peter's wife?

It rings true for me, this woman who never claimed the limelight for herself but who saw first hand the birth of the church. We can only guess at her character and her role in it all.

We read in Peter's own letters his deep love and respect for her, as he encourages men to love and respect their wives. Perhaps this verse is a description of his own wife, whom he admired as a model for all women:

Reading 7: 1 Peter 3:3-4

I can't explain the deep sense of connection I have with this hidden woman. But something in me resonates with her life, her faith, her inner beauty, her leadership, her marriage, her mothering ... not just of her own children but of the whole of the early church. From her life as a fisherwife by the lake through cities and towns, across oceans and between languages, she journeyed to the very heart of the Roman empire, and, I believe, played a key role in the growth of the church into its place as a world-wide faith. And sustaining it all was, surely, the outworkings of her knowledge of Jesus Christ, her witnessing of his death and resurrection and her experience of the power of the Holy Spirit, in her own life and seeing its dramatic effect on people of every culture.