

Mark 14:66-77 ⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. ⁶⁸ But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. ⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." ⁷⁰ Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." ⁷¹ He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." ⁷² Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Last week Jesus was before the Sanhedrin, and a number of rules were broken by the High Priest. I'm glad that Janet explained this to us, as it isn't something that seems ever to come up much. Caiaphas was a thoroughly unpleasant man, who was supposed to uphold Jewish law, rules of evidence, and make sure all was done properly, but thought nothing of denying justice when it suited him. The rest of the Sanhedrin, up to 70 senior figures among the Sadducees, Pharisees and Scribes were equally bad as none is recorded as making objections to the proceedings being out of order.

These last verses in chapter 14 relate to what happened to Peter while Jesus was inside being questioned and later beaten. Remember these proceedings took place at night, while it was still dark, in contravention of Jewish law. Peter would have fled with the other disciples when Jesus was arrested, but seems not to have gone very far. As it was Passover, there would have been a full moon. The Sanhedrin met inside the Temple complex in the chamber of hewn stone. The Temple was a very large building and the whole of the Temple mount covered an area of 33 acres: 1600 by 900 feet.

There are accounts of Peter's betrayal in all four Gospels.

Matthew 26 ⁹ Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him. 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee,' she said. ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said. ⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant-girl saw him and said to the people there, 'This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.' ⁷² He denied it again, with an oath: 'I don't know the man!' ⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, 'Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.' ⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!' Immediately a cock crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: 'Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Luke 22 ⁵⁴ Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. ⁵⁵ And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. ⁵⁶ A servant-girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, 'This man was with him.' ⁵⁷ But he denied it. 'Woman, I don't know him,' he said. ⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, 'You also are one of them.' 'Man, I am not!' Peter replied. ⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, 'Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.' ⁶⁰ Peter replied, 'Man, I don't know what you're talking about!' Just as he was speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: 'Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times.' ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.

John 18 ¹⁵ *Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant-girl on duty there and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ 'You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?' she asked Peter. He replied, 'I am not.' ¹⁸ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood round a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.*

Then some verses on Jesus being questioned. John 18 ²⁵ *Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, 'You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?' He denied it, saying, 'I am not.' ²⁶ One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, 'Didn't I see you with him in the garden?' ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a cock began to crow.*

All the accounts are similar, but some have some extra information. Luke says Peter followed those arresting Jesus, and that the firelight revealed Peter to the servant girl. John's Gospel adds that John was let in but Peter not, and he had to stay outside, plus that it was Peter who cut off the ear of one those arresting Jesus. There is an assumption among all four Gospel writers that readers who were Jewish would be familiar with the Temple area. The Gospels were written for a Jewish audience by Jewish authors. People would know that those from the Galilee area spoke Aramaic with a distinct accent as well... whether Jesus had this accent, we aren't told, but he is referred to as Jesus of Nazareth by most people, so the likelihood is that he spoke with this accent, as did most of the twelve disciples.

What do these four accounts tell us? Peter and John followed those who arrested and took Jesus away, but stayed back a little. All four Gospels have an account of some part of the proceedings before the Sanhedrin, so presumably someone who was there, inside when all the witnesses were called, and who heard the high priest question Jesus and saw him tear his clothes. Peter is showing some courage in being with the people who may have seen him earlier, but it is the servant girl who forces Peter to deny he knew Jesus. All four Gospels have Peter deny Christ three times, and all mention the cock crowing. Only Luke has Jesus looking straight at Peter when this happens, presumably as he is being led out into the courtyard.

We so often hear about Peter's denial of Christ as if he were weak, having been boastful of never doing such a thing. However, that is not altogether fair: both Peter and John were in the dark courtyard, outside where Jesus was being questioned inside. Having cut off a servant of the high priest's ear, Peter was a marked man, who still had the courage not to leave the scene, and remain close to Jesus. What shook Peter in the end was that he felt brave enough to lie to a couple of servant girls, and finally a third time to several others, probably men, who challenged him having heard his Galilean accent. In addition, we know that Peter was the main source of Mark's Gospel... and he wanted his failure to be recorded. Peter was ashamed of what he did, but wanted to illustrate that Jesus never stopped loving him and was able to forgive him... even make him the one who was boldly able to proclaim the Gospel for many years, suffering abuse, imprisonment, and ultimately death for standing up for Jesus. Whatever bad things we may have done can be forgiven. That is Peter's testimony, and it may be our testimony too. If we have something we are ashamed of in the past, and that we have accepted the forgiveness that comes with repentance and confession of sin, then we can proclaim boldly as is written in John Newton's hymn, Amazing grace, that saved a wretch like me who once was lost and now is found.

John Newton was an eighteenth century sailor who worked with his father in the Mediterranean, but was then press ganged by the Navy, flogged for trying to desert, and eventually found himself on a slave ship. However, he fell out with the crew and was landed in West Africa with a slave dealer

who sold him as a slave to an African princess who kept him with her other slaves and mistreated him for three years. Then he was rescued by a ship sent by his father and went home. On the voyage home, the ship was in a storm off Ireland about to sink and he prayed for deliverance. He found Jesus, the storm abated. Once home, he still invested in the slave trade as did so many others because profits were good: ship out goods to sell to African chiefs for slaves they had captured and return from the Caribbean with sugar and rum to sell in Britain. From being an unbelieving libertine, gambler and drinker who used profane language, he changed, gave up his slave trade investments, took holy orders and became parish priest for 20 years campaigning for the abolition of the slave trade. He died in the same year the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed in 1807. He died a few months after it was enacted. His testimony is that a man can change when he gives his life to Christ, no matter how vile he was before. Peter's denials seem small beer compared how Jesus has affected really wicked people and changed their lives for the better. Yet the Gospels give it prominence, because all the disciples said they loved Jesus and would follow Him anywhere. Betrayal of those you know and love is seen as particularly hurtful throughout the world, and by many as unforgiveable. Yet the Good News of Jesus is about the amazing grace of God, His mercy and forgiveness, available to all who are lost and accept Jesus as lord and saviour.

While Jesus forgives the vilest sinner, we must always remember the second part of the Lord's prayer where we say "Forgive us our trespasses" which is "as we forgive those who trespass against us". Resentment and unforgiveness eat into your soul, and are self destructive. So as Peter who denied Christ three times was forgiven and loved by Jesus, so also can we be forgiven when we come to Jesus to ask for forgiveness.