

The Thief and St. Peter
The 3 C's of True Christian Leaders
(What a Difference a Few Days Can Make)

By Bill Marianes¹

What a difference a few days can make. The most faithful doubt, and the biggest sinners believe. How can that be and which would you be? Let's review.

St. Peter (a/k/a "the rock") walked with our Lord and saw, first-hand, the many miracles Christ performed, and he heard our Lord preach the Word. Imagine having a front row seat next to the Messiah. And after all St. Peter heard, witnessed and saw with his own eyes, our Lord accurately foresaw that St. Peter would deny being a disciple of Christ. (Matthew 26:34) St. Peter proudly protested that he would not abandon and deny his Master (Matthew 26:35) and boldly proclaimed: "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You."

Well we all know how that turned out. Just a short while later, St. Peter repeatedly said he didn't even know "the Man." (Matthew 26:69-75). In today's vernacular, we might say St. Peter "didn't have His back" or perhaps we'd say he "threw Him under the bus?" But St. Peter was not alone. St. Matthew, in what must have been a hard reality to confess, tells us clearly, that at the end, when Christ was being arrested and needed his brothers the most: "Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled." (Matthew 26:56). So much for the Courage of Conviction. The Apostles were great and holy men who redeemed themselves with their faith, preaching and teaching, but this was not one of their finest hours.

Now let's fast forward and look at one of the really bad guys in the story of these days. A true thief, a "criminal" (Luke 23:39) whose crimes were so great that he was sentenced to death. We don't know too much about him, but we would clearly say today: "he was a bad guy." He had not walked and worked with Christ. He had not seen our Lord's countless miracles and healing grace. He had not experienced Christ's redeeming love and patient teaching. He just finds himself being put to death, and coincidentally crucified right next to our Lord. What are the chances of that happening?

So what does this evil man have to say: "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom." (Luke 23:42) Wait! What was that? The bad actor who has seen nothing of Christ's greatness, publicly acknowledges Him to be the Lord of "the Kingdom?" And the Apostles who saw everything, instead doubted, denied and abandoned our Lord. What powerful contrasting imagery the Holy Gospel gives us. We know the thief was promised to be with our Lord that day in Paradise (Luke 23:43), and yet look at what the Apostles had to do, and endure, to receive the same great fate. Wow, this must really be an important lesson in Christian faith leadership.

So, what are we to learn about being a faithful Christian leader and good steward of God's many gifts? I think one message of these powerful Holy Scripture passages is what I call the "3-C" model of what it takes to be a true Christian leader and a true steward of Christ's church.

My first "C" stands for Conviction. Conviction is simply defined as a "firmly held belief." I also like the definition that says a Conviction is "the act of moving a person by argument or evidence to belief." It takes information. It takes reasons and reasoning. And it leads to something you are willing to pronounce as "the truth." Not just fantasy or opinion or conjecture. But the real "gospel

truth” (pun intended). Before one can lead themselves or others, they must be Convicted that the direction they are pursuing is righteous, appropriate, the best Choice, and just plain right.

My second “C” stands for Courage. We all think we understand Courage. Many think they have demonstrated it. But we clearly know it when we see it in others. We see first responders and soldiers risking their lives to save others whom they do not even know. We see it in leaders of movements who are willing to risk everything, including their freedom, and sometimes even their lives, for the cause to which they are Convicted. There can be no better example than our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. After asking those to whom He preached to go “all in” (as in the young rich man in Matthew 19:16-26), He demonstrated His complete Conviction to His faith and calling, by sacrificing His very life on the cross.

And when we develop a Conviction, and demonstrate Courage, we are led to the point of my third “C” a Choice. Indeed, many Choices. What will we Choose to do? Will we demonstrate our Conviction and Courage and make the right and righteous Choice in the beliefs we pronounce and the actions we pursue? Or will we have doubts, and fears, and “play it safe” by taking the path of least resistance. Will we “forsake” what we say we believe in, and instead “flee” as the Apostles did on that faithful night? Or will we have the bold Courage of Conviction of the thief, and publicly declare our humility to Christ and the cause, and ask to be remembered in His kingdom.

Now, far be it from me, the first among sinners, to cast any stones in the direction of our glorious and Courageous Apostles. Would that any of us could take the crosses they bore with such grace, love, dignity and power. And a few moments of weakness and doubt do not a person or legacy make. They are merely teachable moments.

I heard an inspirational preacher, Andy Stanley, deliver a powerful homily about how the Apostles doubted right after Christ’s crucifixion and death, fearing He was just a man. That is, until they became convinced of His resurrection. Indeed in the story of “the road to Emmaus,” and in what follows (Luke 24:13-49), we see their transformation and Conviction that led to their Courage to inevitably make the very Choices that propelled them on their ministry to overcome all adversity and do as they were commanded in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19) or if you prefer “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15).

So what kind of Christian leader and faithful steward are you? Do you believe and have the Conviction of your faith, or are you merely going through the motions? Do you truly believe in the risen Lord and that you too were called to some service or ministry to His church? Do you truly believe that you were given gifts by your Maker to use for the benefit of others and on your journey toward theosis?

Do you have the Courage to step out, and forward, and live the life you were called to live and make disciples, if not yet of all nations, at least in your Parish or community? When challenged by others, including some of those “in authority” (who would rather maintain their position of power rather than achieve what needs to be done), will you be brave and faithful and not back down or flee?

When you truly demonstrate your Conviction and Courage, you can begin to make the right and better Choices. You can acknowledge that you have been given gifts and talents, and then stand up

and use them better and more fully. I believe that stewardship is what you do with all of the gifts God gave you. So what are you good at that your Parish or community needs? And how are you, with Conviction and Courage, making the right Choice to offer those gifts and talents to help others on your journey toward “the Kingdom.”

Yeah, I know, you’re busy. So are all of us. So were the Apostles when Christ commanded them to leave it all behind and follow Him. Your Conviction and Courage can be, but doesn’t have to be, as great as theirs. However, you have to have a Conviction of faith, and demonstrate the Courage in your belief, in order to live, preach and teach it and then make the right Choices.

And when you do, you will be a true steward of God’s gifts and truly live your stewardship calling. What’s stopping you from becoming the true and faithful Christian leader you were destined and called to become? Yes, we must constantly pray that the Lord remembers us in his Kingdom. However, we must also act like we mean it.

Discover what you’re good at that your Parish or community needs, and then have the Courage and Conviction to make the right Choice to lead by example. God bless you on your journey as you discover and live your stewardship calling. My prayer for you is that you “SOTPAETJ” (stay on The Path and enjoy the journey).

¹ Bill Marianes is the Chief Evangelist Officer of the Stewardship Calling ministry focused on helping people and parishes discover and live their stewardship callings so that they may have a good account before the awesome judgment seat of Christ. The always free www.stewardshipcalling.com website contains many resources to help churches and parishioners with stewardship, strategic planning, engaged discipleship, discovering your WHY, servant leadership, effective communications and church operational excellence. Bill is also a member of the Orthodox Ministry Services Team: <https://orthodoxministry.org/>. Bill can be reached at Bill@stewardshipcalling.com.