

Notes for teachers on Saint Peter (?- about 64A.D.)

Peter was a leading disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. He was a leader of the early Christian community in Jerusalem and is a prominent figure in the New Testament. Peter's original name was Simon. Jesus gave him the name Peter, which means *rock* in Greek. Peter is sometimes called Simon Peter in the New Testament.

In a passage from the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as saying to Peter:

"And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:18-19).

Traditionally, Roman Catholics regard the above passage as evidence that Jesus chose Peter to be the first head of His church. They believe He established the position of pope through Peter. Protestant scholars interpret the passage to mean that Jesus meant His church to be founded on Peter's faith in Him. But both groups agree that Peter led the early Christian community.

Early life. Peter, a Jew by birth, was born in Bethsaida, a town in Palestine on the east bank of the River Jordan. The apostle Andrew was his brother, and the apostle Philip also came from Bethsaida. Some Jews looked down upon people who came from this area because of the number of gentiles who lived amongst the Jewish community there. Peter later moved to the nearby town of Capernaum on the bank of the Sea of Galilee, where he became a fisherman. The New Testament portrays him as warm, generous, stubborn, and impulsive. He was married and may have had children.

Peter and Andrew met Jesus while they were fishermen. Jesus said to the brothers, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Mark 1:17). Peter and Andrew left their homes and joined Jesus on His travels.

Life as a disciple. Stories in the New Testament reflect Peter's importance in the Christian community as a close friend of Jesus and His followers. Peter, along with the apostles James and John, is said to have witnessed the Transfiguration (see [Transfiguration](#)). Jesus also talked with Peter about religious matters. When Jesus asked the disciples about His identity, Peter replied, "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 8:29).

The Gospels suggest that Peter understood Jesus and His significance only after the Resurrection. Before the Crucifixion, Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus. Peter later wept in repentance (Mark 14:72). Peter was one of the first witnesses of the Resurrection listed by Saint Paul (I Corinthians 15:5). After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter in a vision. This vision and the faith in Jesus that it produced, is the foundation of Christianity.

After the Resurrection, Peter became an authority among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He probably served as a peacemaker between conservative Aramaic-speaking Jews led by James, and the more liberal Greek-speaking Jews led by Paul. Peter is sometimes called the "Apostle to the Jews."

Later years. Peter apparently left Jerusalem with his wife and became a wandering missionary. According to Christian tradition, Peter became the first bishop of Antioch in Syria, and the first bishop of Rome. He may have died a martyr in Rome during the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero from A.D. 64 to 68. According to Christian tradition, Peter was buried under what is now St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. There is no conclusive evidence for any event related to his death. Two letters bearing his name appear in the New Testament, although some scholars doubt his authorship of them.

Monuments to Peter, in addition to stories about him, honour him as a missionary and an organiser of the Christian church. By the 100's, a shrine that many believed contained Peter's remains had been built in Rome. The shrine attracted many Christian pilgrims. St. Peter's Basilica stands on the site today. Early Christians honoured Peter in art and literature, where he was called the Fisherman, the Rock, and the Shepherd.

In fine arts St. Peter is often depicted with keys, cockerel, as the bird which heralded his betrayal of Christ (John 13:38), inverted cross, fishing boat, net, fish, chain, papal tiara. Later the key became first a papal symbol (who keep those keys) and then an ecclesiastical one.

By about 450, many Christians believed that the pope was the successor of Peter. They also believed Peter was a saint. June 29 is the feast day of Saint Peter, this being the traditional date of his martyrdom.

