

Column - Peter

Unless you live on a farm, you probably don't spend a great deal of time thinking about fowls. They give us eggs and, especially in the South, fried chicken. That's about the extent of our thinking about them.

Yet, the male, the cockerel, is a recognized Christian symbol, one that merits our attention. In England, Europe and occasionally here, one sees a cockerel, usually made of copper, adorning a church spire. Why?

I suspect this practice has its roots in one of the most dramatic scenes in the Passion narrative, Peter hearing the plaintive sound of the cock and being reminded of Jesus' prediction that he would betray Him three times.

What followed, according to Luke 22:61, was "the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter." Perhaps their eyes met while Jesus looked out the window of the High Priest's house where a hearing was taking place or as Jesus was being led out of the hall. It is

hard to say. What is important is that both the cock crowing and Jesus' look prompted Godly repentance on Peter's part.

Reflecting on the latter – Jesus' look – the great 19th-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon said: “I think it was a heart-piercing look and a heart-healing look all in one -- a look which revealed to Peter the blackness of his sin, and also the tenderness of his Master's heart towards him.” No doubt there have been occasions in our own lives when Jesus has looked at us as He looked at Peter. Hopefully we responded as Peter did.

But back to the cockerel, more often on this side of the Atlantic called a rooster. Why their perch on church towers? Again, they seem to point us back to Peter and remind us of our need for vigilance. The voices around us, like those around Peter, beckon us to compromise, to fudge on our devotion to Jesus and the Gospel. The cock says, “Don't go down that path. Remember Peter.”

At the same time, the cock points us on to what followed Peter's fall -- his restoration -- and thus to

Jesus' love, compassion and forgiveness. Following His resurrection, Jesus gave Peter a chance to confess Him and to receive a new commission. Three times He asked: "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" (John 21:15). Three times Peter responded, yes. Each of these affirmations were followed by Jesus' words, "Feed my lambs."

Peter went on to become the first herald of the new day brought in by Jesus' death and resurrection. It was he who took to the streets of Jerusalem on Pentecost proclaiming that God the Father had raised Jesus, thus declaring Him to be Israel's true King.

The cockerel on a gray church tower reminds us that with the coming of Jesus history has turned a corner and can never be the same. In Genesis 2 we are told that God ended His work and rested on the seventh day. That rest ended when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning. With Easter came new creation. You and I are living in the eighth day or, if you prefer, the first day of God's new week. That is, of course, why Christians worship on the first day of the week.

Putting these thoughts together, the lowly cock whether seen atop the spire of a church or crowing atop a fence in a barnyard reminds us not to go down the path Peter went down but to boldly confess Jesus even in difficult situations. It further reminds us to come back to Jesus quickly and receive forgiveness should we fail. Finally, it reminds us that we are part of God's new day. Let's heed the cock's call to wake up and get busy!

ALMIGHTY God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee that, as by thy special grace preventing [going before] us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. Amen.
(Collect for Easter Day, Book of Common Prayer)

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