

Many of you enjoy reading detective stories. I rarely read them, an occasional book like The da Vinci Code satisfies my thirst. But this past week I read a short book, 175 pages, entitled The Bones of St. Peter, a true story that reads like a detective story. It covers the years from 1939 when a scientific search began under the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome to 1968 when Pope Paul VI announced that the authentic remains of the Apostle Peter had been found. It really tells a 1900 year story of how Peter was crucified in Rome sometime in the 60's, and his body illegally buried in a public cemetery, and for the next 250 years his tomb was secretly visited and venerated by many Christians. Eventually Constantine built the first basilica over it, although the exact place where the bones were buried was kept a secret, then eventually was forgotten. I do believe the bones of Peter are authentic, and those of us who traveled to Rome last year had the privilege of celebrating mass at his very tomb.

But the bigger question is why have the remains of this saint been so venerated over the entire history of Christianity? There are a number of answers. First of all there are no remains of the body of Jesus, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Nor are there any remains of Mary. We are not sure where she died, in Jerusalem at the place of Dormitian Abbey, or in Ephesus, where a tradition exists that she lived there with John. And after her death, there followed the Assumption. Of the apostles, Peter was the one most connected with the Lord. He and his brother Andrew were the first ones called and the first ones to follow Jesus. Peter's name appears in the gospels more times than all the others taken together. We have been reading about Peter almost every Sunday recently. He's the one who got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus, and then began to sink. And Jesus said to him, "O you of little faith." He was the first one to profess faith in Jesus, saying "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Last week Jesus said to him "you are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church." And this week, after Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection, Peter rebukes him, and in turn Jesus calls him Satan, "get behind me, Satan." We could continue by talking about Peter's ultimate failure, denying that he even knew Jesus, and his ultimate triumph, being crucified out of love and faithfulness to our Lord.

That is why we love Peter. He could be so right at times, and so wrong at other times, a success and a failure, a saint and a sinner. He was just like us, or we are so much like him, a saint and a sinner, a success and a failure

In our gospel today Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." That is what Peter struggled with. He did not want to see Jesus with a cross, and he did not want a cross for himself. But through the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, he finally got it, he professed his love for Jesus, and spent the rest of his life serving the Lord, finally dying upside down on the cross.

We do not want the cross either, and the crosses of life are never of our own choosing. Perhaps it is the illness that comes with aging, a wayward child, unfilled dreams, struggling with our spiritual life. But the crosses we are given are the crosses we must accept. In accepting them and bearing them, as Jesus did, as Peter did, we will find life.