

## **Sermon for Sunday 27 August 2023 – The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity**

**Pete Postle, Reader**

***Isaiah 51.1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20***

May all I say and think be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Reading through this again this morning, I realise I've come up with what's more like a study of the Bible than it is a sermon. And you may find it useful to have your little white books in front of you and a few little grey cells to hand.

We heard today what is normally referred to as the confession of Peter. Confessioner is with the meaning of declaration, Peter's declaration of faith. This passage is of extreme importance to the Roman Catholic Church, as it is the basis of their teaching on the position of the Pope. They infer from this passage that St Peter was given the keys which can open or bar the gates to heaven to any one of us that he is also here being given the power to absolve or not to absolve any person from his or her sins. With these supreme powers, Peter becomes the first Bishop of Rome and his powers have been passed down to succeeding heads of the Church who as Pope are also Bishops of Rome.

While accepting Peter's role as leader of the Twelve, Protestants begged to differ. They would point to other passages; an example earlier in this Gospel, Matthew chapter ten, where Jesus gives very similar powers to all the twelve disciples, not just Peter. And we are Protestants, some of us Anglo-Catholics, but we in the Church of England prefer to sit tactfully somewhere in the middle. But that means we've had to reflect and comment on this passage from Scripture with some delicacy.

It happens at Caesarea Philippi, named in honour of the Roman Emperor, but with Philippi tracked on to distinguish it from the other Caesarea on the coast. And of course to remind folk that Herod Philip built it, or rather he developed it from the earlier tower of Panaeus that stood on the site. Panaeus, named after the Greek god Pan. Rather more relevant is that the town was also outside the area ruled by Herod Antipas, and perhaps Jesus has taken his followers there to get a breather from the ground swell of opinion that's building up both for and against him in Galilee.

Worst of all, all this interest in Jesus may be based on a false premise. Who, he asks of his disciples, somewhat wearily, we could conjecture, 'Who do you say that the Son of man is?' Again, it's that enigmatic term that Jesus applies so often to himself. It really just means here a human being.

Who do people say that I am? Well, on other occasions it is difficult to resist the implication that Jesus is referring to the prophet Daniel's vision, which goes like this - I saw in the night visions and behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven. There was given him dominion and glory, and a kingdom, that all people should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion. So you can see, 'Son of man' meaning me, or 'Son of man' meaning this person sent down from Almighty God.

But Jesus realises that this passage has not got through to the populace at large. Instead, some think he is John the Baptist, resurrected. Herod Antipas certainly thought that; quoting from Mark's Gospel, when Herod heard of it, that is to say Jesus's healing and spreading the Gospel, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded has been raised.'

Some say he is Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. I quote the last two verses of our Old Testament: 'Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so I will not come and strike the land with a curse.'

And others, as the reading says, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. Why Jeremiah in particular? When I was young, I used to hear a person referred to as a Jeremiah, if that person seemed unnecessarily pessimistic - now that's unfair. Jeremiah was a prophet at the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. He grieves his people and their stubbornness, but there is always hope running through his prophecies and that's what Jesus's disciples are grasping and relating to.

Thus Jesus's disciples summarise for him just what he must have feared, that there was a danger that his support was going to come from those restless Israelites who wanted a military leader to wrest their country back from the Roman occupiers. And so Jesus, perhaps with a deep sigh, anew, 'Who do you say I am? Have any of you seen what I stand for, where I come from?' And for once, good old impulsive Simon Peter gets it right; 'You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.' Christ in Greek is the translation of Messiah in Hebrew, which in turn means the Anointed One. So this statement says, you are the Anointed One of God.

And Jesus responds, blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven. Now there, flesh and blood is just a shorthand phrase for humankind and its way of thinking. Peter has not got to this enlightened discovery of what Jesus meant to him by any amount of theological theory and debate, but by the gift of God, which is what blessed means here. And so back to perhaps the problematical bit of today's reading; 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'

So Simon is here renamed Peter. It's a familiar pun on Petros, Greek for rock. The pun reaches back into the Aramaic, where it is Cephas. And you'll see Peter referred to as Cephas in some bits of the Bible. Now, Jesus's renaming of Simon is something God has done before. Genesis, chapter 17 - no longer shall your name be Abram, which means exalted father, but your name shall be Abraham, father of a multitude. And in Genesis 35, God said to him, your name is Jacob. He takes by the heel no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel, God strives, or the one who strives with God shall be your name.

And why should I be quoting these references? Remember Isaiah 51? You've got it there in your books, which you also heard today. Look to the rock from which you are hewed, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who bore you. From this derives a rabbinic

comment, when God looked upon Abraham, who was to rise, he said, behold, I have found a rock on which I can build and found the world. Abraham, then, is the rock on which God will build his chosen people, the old covenant with mankind. And here the most natural interpretation of this New Testament scripture, is that his only son, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, is identifying Simon as the rock on which he can build his church, the rock that it is of the New Covenant.

Now, the word church is our English translation of the Greek ecclesia, but scholars seem not sure what the Aramaic word that Jesus would have used, as has thus been translated. On the whole, the view is that Jesus was thinking of Peter and the other disciples as the nucleus of his worldwide congregation, his people, the children of Abraham, going on to a new, enlightened future. I don't think, I'm afraid, that for one minute Jesus would have been thinking of an institutionalised church such as the one that's grown up since. Indeed, you'll remember much of what he says to the Pharisees, the orthodox believers of the time, is a criticism of the obstacles to belief that such institutions are in danger of placing in the path of those who seek God.

And so, to summarise, does Jesus's statement mean that Peter is the first holder of the role of chief executor of the Church? That seems to me to misinterpret how Jesus would have his church work. On the other hand, does it mean that Jesus is addressing Simon Peter and all the disciples? That seems to me to understate Peter's prominence amongst the Twelve. Instead, if we compare Abraham and Peter's roles as rocks, each a foundation stone for a development of God's will for all mankind, don't we simply have Jesus declaring Peter as patriarch, a founding father of his church, the children of God, just as Abraham was a patriarch of the children of Israel? Amen.