

Matthew 16 v13-20 Romans 12 v 1-8 Psalm 138

Peter gets it Right written by Sarah Ashton

May my feet walk in your way Lord, may my hands do your work Lord, may my mind think of you Lord, may my heart be filled with your Love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

We often hear people talk about their loved one as their rock, someone they can rely upon, lean upon and who provides support. Rocks, geologically, come in many forms. I envisage rugged cliffs that are battered by stormy seas; granite tors on Dartmoor that my father expected me to climb as a child, an experience that I did not enjoy and don't wish to repeat, but I know for some it is a challenge to be risen to with enthusiasm; I see the formations of the Grand Canyon and the State Parks in Utah and Nevada, those wonderful shapes that nature has crafted using God's elements that leave me speechless with awe; I feel the warmth of the pools that form on the rocky outcrops on beaches and the life that teams with in them. Rocks are used by people and animals as tools; they are a building material, but they can also be destructive. There are many different types of rock, it could be sedimentary, igneous or metamorphic; a rock could just fit in your hand, it could be an island and it underlies all land masses. It could be rock that weathers and degrades or it could stand the test of time.

Towards the end of today's Gospel reading Jesus tells Simon that he will now be known as Petros, which is the Greek word for Peter and then says that His church will be built on this rock, the Greek word for which is Petra. The Books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek (the Old Testament was originally in Hebrew; though by the time the New Testament was written, Greek versions of the Old testament were widely used) although it was not the

language that Jesus would have used. He would have spoken in Aramaic. The Jewish religious teachers would have used Hebrew and educated people in the Eastern Mediterranean would have used Greek (as well as the Roman Latin). Most people would have been familiar with more than one language.

So what leads Jesus to this prophetic announcement?

Jesus and his disciples are in the region of Caesarea Philippi, which is to the north of the Sea of Galilee, near the slopes of Mount Hermon, and was a particularly pagan area. Jesus asks his disciples 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' The term son of Man appears 81 times in the Greek text of the Gospels and is a term that Jesus uses to describe Himself; it alludes both to his humanity and his divinity. It is a term that was used in the Old Testament to refer to the Messiah, whom God would send, which makes it a Messianic title and so by applying the title to Himself Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah who has come to save the Jews. The Jews, who Jesus addressed in his teaching, would be very familiar with the phrase.

However as the disciples reply to Jesus it is clear that the crowds are not seeing Jesus as God's Messiah, but rather as John the Baptist, or Elijah or Jeremiah or another of the prophets, characters with whom they are familiar from their Jewish teachings or life, in the case of John the Baptist. The people have heard Jesus teach and although they relate to him as a good teacher they have not been able to take the next step.

Now Jesus asks the disciples and Simon says 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'. He has understood. He sees Jesus as the promised Messiah, God's Son. He has got it right. Alleluia! He knows who he is following, and has the courage to say out loud that Jesus is not just an ordinary man but the Son of God.

Jesus is delighted with Simon's answer and tells him that God has inspired him with this answer and that from now on he will be known as Petros, Peter and he will be the Petra, the rock on which the church is founded. This rock will be so strong that even the power of Hades will not overcome it. Hades is the Greek name for the place of departed spirits, which is equivalent to the Hebrew Sheol. The Gate of Hades stands for the 'powers of death', which in turn equates to all forces that are opposed to Christ and his Kingdom and in some pagan traditions the cave at Caesarea Philippi represented the Gate of Hades. The rock on which Jesus is founding his church is a strong one that is protected by God.

It might seem strange that in the last verse of the Gospel reading Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone else that Peter had declared him to be the Son of God. This is not because he doesn't want people to follow him, but, for fear that some of the Jews will think he is going to lead a revolution against Rome, which will precipitate his death more quickly and take away from his teaching on God's kingdom. Previously Jesus has asked people not to tell others about miracles that he has performed. Scholars refer to this as the Messianic Secret.

Jesus says that he will give Peter the keys of the kingdom, and artists use the keys as the symbol for identifying Peter in paintings and sculptures. On the day of Pentecost, which is recorded in Acts (ch2) it is Peter who addresses the crowd and explains to them the significance of the Holy Spirit working in the disciples and encourages the crowd to become followers quoting to them from Old Testament. It could be that it is the conversion of so many Jews that is the beginning of the unlocking of the Kingdom of God. Later in Acts (ch 10) it is Peter who has the dream that leads him to Cornelius, who is a Gentile, and the Kingdom is now unlocked for all people as 'God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.' In giving Jesus the right answer Peter has sealed his mission for the rest of his life.

Peter's right answer has provided the key to God's kingdom. In our reading from Romans we are told to live our lives for God, not only with our deeds but also our morality, and as John Castle said in his sermon in July we must be careful not to judge others. The passage goes on to explain that it takes many members to make a body and all the different members have different functions and therefore different contributions to make.

For the church to flourish on the rock it has to have continuity, versatility and variety, a complex mix to achieve. The original disciples were not all from one family, or fisherman. They all brought something slightly different to their discipleship and from there to the early church. They came to know God through their time with Jesus. I wonder whether the others were ready to give the same answer as Peter and he just said it first. Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples so, in fairness, I would hope that he had more insight into Jesus' mission.

Around two thousand years later we are still followers of that faith and proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God. Our worship is another facet of our faith. Today's Psalm talks about praising God and bowing before him because it is God who has made the author bold and stout hearted by answering his call (v3). It says that God is looking on the lowly but knows the proud from afar (v6). It assures us that God will be with us even in difficult times and just as God provided Peter with the right answer, he will fulfil his purpose for each of us, with a love that endures eternally.

I think there are many things that we can take from today's readings, amongst them are these three points

Firstly that we must respect and acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and make our own confession of faith, not just in the words of the Creed but from our hearts, in a way that is reflected in the way we live our lives;

Secondly that we must be, like Peter, rocks that God's community and work can be built upon, each of us sharing our faith in our dealings with others;

And thirdly that we humbly walk in God's way and not be proud or boastful, but respectful and genuine in our faith.

Amen