

12th Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 51: 1-6, Romans 12: 1-8 and Matthew 16: 13-30

Mother Emma

It has been said that one of the more controversial Bible verses in the history of the Christian Church, one which has caused bitter division, violence and bloodshed, is verse 18 from our Gospel reading today: *"You are Peter, and on this rock I shall build my church."* The words are inscribed in letters six feet high above the tomb of St Peter in St Peter's Basilica in Rome; they are the words which for centuries underpinned the authority and structure of Western Christianity. They were understood to mean that Peter, the first leader of the Church in Jerusalem, and later Bishop of Rome, and hence ALL his successors in the post as Bishop of Rome, should be the ultimate authority in Christ's church.

Church leaders pointed to Jesus' promise that Peter would have the authority to *"bind and loose"*, a phrase used in Hebrew rabbinic language to describe rulings which were binding on a whole community. As divisions arose between different Christian congregations and the Bishops of Rome, first at the Schism between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism, and later at the Reformation, theologians wrestled with the question of what exactly Jesus meant when he said these words reported by Matthew.

One issue arises over the word *"ekklesia"* in Greek, here translated as church. When my family visited the Ancient Greek colony of Paestum on the Italian coast, I was interested to see that the *"ecclesia"* there meant the assembly in which political decisions were made. The word can mean political gathering, assembly, or even movement, whilst in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, in use around the time of Christ, *ecclesia* is used to mean *"congregation"* in a religious sense. I was taught at school, as perhaps some of you also were, that William Tyndale was burnt at the stake for daring to translate the Bible into English. It is only much more recently that I discovered it was actually particular aspects of his translation – such as using the word assembly instead of church when translating this very verse – which actually caused offence, by opening up a discussion about whether Jesus was actually speaking of the Holy Catholic Church as it had evolved by the time Tyndale was writing.

There is little doubt that Peter was the first leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem, and the tradition that he also led the church in Rome, though not strictly Biblical, is firmly held, and in this sense, he is certainly the rock on which Jesus's church has been established. But the words have also been interpreted over recent centuries in many subtly different ways.

The Eastern Orthodox churches point to the fact that immediately before Jesus speaks, Peter has made a clear declaration of faith, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* They would say that this faith, this unequivocal revelation that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, is the rock on which the Church of Christ is built, and that it was Peter's faith, and this key fact, to which Jesus referred. Protestant theologians, meanwhile, have interpreted the statement to mean that Peter is the prototype for the followers of Christ – that his faith, his human weaknesses, his remorse at his own failures and Christ's repeated forgiveness, provide the example of humility and grace around which God's church is built.

Each of these interpretations can be seen as both helpful and valid – the tragedy is that over the centuries, they have been seen as mutually exclusive – but we can turn to Peter as the leader of Christ’s church, as the one who received and expressed the revelation that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and the example which we as followers of Christ can follow.

Jesus is of course making a pun by re-naming Simon as Peter, meaning “*rock*” – a pun still instantly understood without explanation in French, for example, where the word Pierre is used for both Peter and a stone. Yet it is also good to be reminded by our first reading, that Jesus may also have been referring back to Abraham, who was described in our first reading by Isaiah as the rock from which those who pursue righteousness are hewn.

Like Peter, Abraham’s name was changed, as he was given a new commission. Abram’s new name Abraham means “*father of a multitude*”, and it was from him that the chosen people of God in the Old Testament grew and were governed. Perhaps in calling Simon Peter a rock, Jesus is also echoing that sense that like Abraham, he was called and blessed by God for a particular purpose, to develop a people whose primary aim was to pursue righteousness and to seek the Lord.

I am often touched by the poignant way in which bereaved husbands or wives say of their late partner “*he (or she) was my rock.*” In a troubled world, in which violent conflict, political disarray, and natural disaster seem to unfold daily before our very eyes, perhaps all of us seek the sense of certainty and groundedness implied by the word “*rock*”.

Peter’s faith, his leadership and his character all offer to Christians today, through the many churches founded in Christ’s name and seeking to do his will, the chance to find a firm foundation for faith in a timeless and unchanging God who, despite the weaknesses, evils and failings of humankind, is with us always to the end of the age. Peter teaches us to speak out boldly about the fundamental tenets of our faith, to show commitment to Christ, and to lead others by example, regardless of the cost. He shows us that it is God himself who is ultimately, as the Psalms tell us, our Rock and our Salvation.

We cannot ultimately control everything which happens around us on earth – perhaps, as Isaiah suggests, the heavens will one day vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and those who live on it will die like gnats, but we can share with faith and hope in Peter’s – and Isaiah’s – conviction that, whatever happens, God’s salvation will be forever, and his deliverance will never be ended. Amen