

24.8.14.7 – Trinity 10 Year A – Isaiah 51.1-6; Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Jesus said to Simon, “You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church”

Any builder will tell you that, for a building to be secure – and able to withstand the force of the elements – it needs to be built on a firm foundation. The house will take time to grow and develop – inside and out, but the foundation is the key.

That is no less true of our Christian faith. You’ll remember Jesus said that those who listened to his words, and took them to heart, were like the man who built his house upon the rock.

Rock endures. And it’s not surprising that the word “rock” is often used to describe the nature and character of God.

Sometimes, though, when sickness or tragedy afflict us or threaten the lives of our loved ones, our faith feels anything but rock-like. Such events bring us face to face with the uncertainty and unpredictability ... and sometimes the unfairness of life .. leaving us asking, is there really a god out there, and if so, does he really care what happens to us?

In our OT reading today, Isaiah describes Abraham as the “rock from which the Jews were hewn”. He is writing to the exiles in Babylon, whose faith was probably at a very low ebb.

Through Isaiah, God says to them, “take heart” ... “Listen to me. Look at Abraham, who was but one when I called him, and yet I made of him a great nation. That is the kind of God I am. Look at the earth and sky you think they are enduring, yet one day they will cease to exist. But the salvation *I* have promised to those who love me will last *for ever*”

Throughout their history the Israelites drew on the memory of God’s saving power to sustain them when times were hard. And to this day, at Passover time, the Jews *still* remember and celebrate their deliverance from Egypt.

It’s a reminder, just as our celebration of the Lord’s supper is a reminder, of what God, in Christ, has done for us. He is, indeed, our rock.

The word ‘rock’ features in today’s Gospel as well, but this time it is used of the apostle Peter. Jesus had taken his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, 2 days’ journey from Galilee ... and there ... in Gentile territory ... far from the crowds and controversy with the Jews .. he asked them: “Who do people say that I am?”

Their replies help us to see that he was seen, not so much the ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’; not the cosy comforting friend of little children; but more like the fiery prophets who had stood up against Israel’s wayward and rebellious kings!

Men like John the Baptist, arrested for criticising King Herod; Elijah and Jeremiah, who, in Jewish thought, would return to *herald* the Messiah.

This sounds all quite bizarre to us... but, and I found this surprising, there was, apparently, no fixed view among the Jews of what the Messiah would be like. Some envisaged a military leader

who would liberate them from Roman oppression; others a powerful King like who would sit on David's throne; yet others as a priest who would purify the Temple. The one thing they did have in common, was he would usher in a new age – the age to come. Jesus didn't appear to fit into any of those boxes – he was a comfort for some and a disturbance for others. And it's clear that people just did not know what to make him.

This is what makes what happened next so *deeply significant*.

Turning to his disciples Jesus said to them: What about you, who do *you* say that I am?"

The question is, of course, addressed to all the disciples, but it was Peter, dear impetuous Peter, who blurted out what surely must have been a growing conviction among them; "You are the Christ, the son of the living God".

Interestingly, not once did Jesus describe himself as the Christ, or Messiah, but as the Son of Man. You can see, can't you, that Peter's words must have filled his heart with joy. At last they understood. At last they had grasped the truth.

"Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this has been not been revealed to you by men but by my Father in heaven.... you are Peter the rock, and on this rock, I will build 'my' Church...

It was, without doubt, a turning point, both in his life and theirs.

Would we, I wonder, at that time have used the word 'rock' to describe the character of Peter ...? Possibly not.

It was, in fact, a bit of a play on words. The Greek for Peter is 'petros', meaning 'a stone' ... the word for rock was 'Petra'. What Jesus was saying was that "you, Peter, are the first to declare your faith in me – you will be the first stone, the first building block of this new community ... and, more than that, gave him authority over it.

Peter wasn't perfect, there was much he didn't know – much he didn't understand – his declaration of faith was only a beginning, **but, but** – and here's the *key* - it opened his life to Christ's **transforming power**. As Jane Williams* points out, it is on the basis of **Peter's confession alone**– on his **conviction of who Christ is** – and on **no other 'ethical basis at all** – that Peter is **made the rock on which the Church is built**.

Surely that should encourage us. When God calls us to a task, however inadequate Or ill equipped we might feel, he *will* empower us. And I certainly can vouch for that.

The church, after all, is made up, not of perfect people, but of ordinary mortals like you and I; of those who know that, through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, they are loved and forgiven by God. Each one of us a unique and vital stone in the building, each called to be Christ's voice and hands and feet in his mission to the world.

Therefore, as Paul urges us in his letter to the Romans: "In view of all that God has done for us in Christ" offer your lives to him – so that, renewed by his transforming power, you will be able to discern his good, pleasing and perfect will.

* Lectionary Reflections by Jane Williams – Year A – page 103

