

Sermon - Being encouraged by the Rock

Based on Isaiah 51.1–6 and Matthew 16.13-20 (both from NRSV)

The significance of Jesus' questions

- Today I am going to start by going through the Gospel reading academically - to approach it more in the manner of a Bible study.
- And then in the last part of my sermon I will reflect on what the passage might mean for us - particularly in connection with both the Old Testament reading and the Collect for today.
- So the first point to note is that this exchange that Jesus has with his first disciples is a pivotal one, and appears in each of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke.
- Up until this point Jesus had been engaging with the crowds, and inviting people - both specifically and generally - to follow him.
- He had taught in synagogues, on hillsides, and shorelines, and people had come to him either for his blessing or to condemn him.
- His close disciples, the twelve named men and the other women and men who participated with them, had mostly been present for the different aspects of his ministry among the people.
- But now Jesus changes the focus of his ministry from the general to the specific - from the crowds to his disciples.
- After this exchange Jesus does not stop interacting with others, but his emphasis is definitely now on preparing the disciples for his death and departure.
- And this is reflected in the two questions he asks.
- First he asks: *'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'* (Matt 16.13) - that is, 'Who do other people think I am?'
- And after receiving various answers that regard him as functioning in the same mould as Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, or one of the other prophets, Jesus then asks: *'But who do you say that I am?'* (Matt 16.15)
- This is a fundamental question for anyone engaging with Jesus.

Simon Peter's answer

- And Peter - Simon who was nicknamed Petros, the Rock - then answers: *'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'* (Matt 16.16)
- In this Gospel account of Matthew's, Peter combines two titles for the first time: Messiah, which is Christ or Anointed One, and Son of God.
- While we are familiar with these titles and are used to saying God's Son Jesus Christ - when Jesus heard Peter combining them for the first time, he understood that this was a new and deeper insight that Peter was displaying.
- It was an insight that the people beyond the circle of disciples were not ready for.
- In contrast, it was an insight that the circle of disciples accompanying Jesus were now ready to engage with, led by Peter.
- It is this moment that might be understood to be the beginning of the formation of the Church - or the beginning of the next distinctive phase in the formation of the Church.

'Son of Jonah'

- And Jesus exclaims: *'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'* (Matt 16.17)
- In another Gospel account Jesus refers to Simon as 'son of John', and so some early translators of the Bible tidied up this difference by trying to correct the name Jonah to John here.
- They presumably thought that John - or Jonah - was the name of Simon Peter's biological father.

Sermon - Being encouraged by the Rock

- However, as in many other places in the Bible, the phrase 'son of' does not necessarily mean physical son, but spiritual son.
- So Jesus, who appreciated the Book of the prophet Jonah, appears to be describing Simon Peter as the spiritual son of the prophet Jonah.
- If you make the effort to read that very short book, you will realise that Jonah and God have quite a few direct conversations, and that Jonah is adept in perceiving the divine revelations given to him.
- So here we can understand that Jesus is commending Simon Peter, saying that, like Jonah, he is likewise adept in perceiving the divine revelations given to him.

The Church on the Rock

- And Jesus specifically calls Simon by his nickname of Petros - the Rock - and names this fundamental faith as the fundament or foundation on which he can now start to establish his Church - the *Ekklesia*, the gathered followers of Jesus.
- Jesus continues: *'the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'* (Matt 16.18)
- That is, the way of death will not be able to overcome the gathering of the followers of Jesus.

The keys of the steward

- His next sentence is a renewal of an ancient edict: *'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'* (Matt 16.19)
- Here Jesus is quoting a passage from Isaiah's prophecy, where Isaiah pronounces God's will that the new governor or steward of king Hezekiah's palace will be Eliakim - whose name means 'God sets up'.
- Here is the passage from Isaiah 22.20-22:
On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.
- So Jesus was similarly setting up Peter to be like Eliakim, to be the steward of the king's palace - the king of David's house now being Jesus, and the palace metaphorically being the kingdom of heaven.
- Eliakim was given the confidence, through Isaiah, that his directives would have the backing of the earthly Davidic king.
- Likewise, as the first disciple to express that deeper insight into who Jesus was, Peter is given the confidence, through Jesus, that his directives would have the backing of the heavenly King.

"Shh! - don't talk about the Messiah."

- The final point that Jesus makes in this reading is that the disciples should not *'tell anyone that he was the Messiah'* (Matt 16.20).
- Which usually strikes us as a bit odd.
- But if you compare this with what Peter had said earlier: *'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,'* you might realise that Peter was making that significant step of going beyond seeing Jesus merely as a messiah.
- After all, other people before Jesus had claimed to be anointed by God, and there were a whole set of expectations of the role of such a person.

Sermon - Being encouraged by the Rock

- The standard expectation was that the messiah was one anointed by God to lead people in revolt against the oppressive occupying forces, in order to re-establish God's political kingdom - as the kingdom of Israel had been under King David.
- And so Jesus was emphasising to the disciples that just because he was the real messiah, he did not want to have to deal with people's false expectations of what they thought the messiah should be and do.

Our faith ancestors

- In the last part of today's sermon, I am going to reflect briefly on the connections between today's Old Testament reading, the Gospel, the Collect, and where we perhaps find ourselves at this time.
- The reading from Isaiah chapter 51 is a reassurance from the Lord - a reminder that when we are troubled by injustice and suffering, that we should remember the faith that we have in our Lord.
- Isaiah reminds us that we are hewn from the same rock - dug from the same quarry - of our faith ancestors Abraham and Sarah.
- And reminds us how Abraham and Sarah were blessed in their faith in the Lord.
- Isaiah concludes the passage by saying:
*Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be for ever,
and my deliverance will never be ended. (Isaiah 51.6)*
- It is an injunction for us to focus on the Lord rather than to focus on the things of this world.
- It is not a denial of unhappiness and suffering, but an encouragement for keeping our faith in the Lord.

Rock-solid faith

- And for me, there is strong connection between the rock-like faith of Abraham and Sarah, and the rock-like faith of Simon Peter.
- As I suggested when introducing today's readings, we tend to think of the unshakeable rock-like qualities of God.
- Our opening hymn this morning, '*Glorious things of you are spoken, Zion, city of our God*', has the well-known description of God: *Rock of Ages*.
- Yet the first story of creation describes us as being made in God's image.
- So if we are made in God's image, and God's stability and dependability are rock-like, then it makes sense that those who have an unshakeable faith in God are sharing in this same quality of God's.
- Jesus looked at Simon Peter, and recognised that deepening faith that Peter had, in being able to acknowledge who Jesus truly was.
- We know that even after that Peter still managed to slip up and make mistakes, but even then he always kept faith with God, through Jesus.

Our Lord's faith in us

- And Jesus maintained his faith in Peter as a disciple, and as an apostle.
- Because faith is fundamentally a relationship: it works both ways.
- Just as we have faith in God, so God has faith in us to follow his way of sacrificial life-giving love.

Sermon - Being encouraged by the Rock

- And this is emphasised in today's Collect, where it prays:
*give us the light of your Spirit,
that, recognising in Jesus of Nazareth
the Son of the living God,
we may be living stones
for the building up of your holy Church (APBA, p575)*
- In this there is an acknowledgement that we, too, can share in the rock-like faith qualities of Abraham, Sarah, and Peter,
- and that as living stones - or rocks - our Lord is depending on us to play our part in building up his Church.
- So, in the light of everything that I've spoken of today, the questions I want to offer you, for your own reflection, are the following:
 1. How are you going with your faith relationship with the Lord at this time?
 2. Are you encouraged - can you be encouraged - by Abraham, Sarah, and Peter's faith?
 3. And can others in our church, likewise be encouraged by your faith?
- And remember, that we are not asked to do this in our own strength, but always need to stay focused on Jesus, who, through the Holy Spirit, guides, encourages, and accompanies us, even in the midst of our current circumstances.

In His name. Amen.