

St Peter, de Beauvoir Town – Parish Eucharist

For St Peter's Day, 26th June 2022.

Matthew 16:13-19; Acts 12:1-11; Ps. 125 and 1 Peter 2:19-25

Mary Marshall

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord who stands around about his people from this time forth for evermore.

First of all, I would like to thank Fr Simon and everyone at here St Peter's for this very warm welcome of me and Ed to church and to de Beauvoir Town – it's our first visit. I'm very glad that I'm here to celebrate with you and to speak to you this morning. I work at a University Faculty of Theology and Religion and my work there frequently requires me to address groups of people, most notably school groups; quite a different context from the one I find myself in this morning. I enjoy the work but on occasion I've found it to be a sobering, even humbling experience to be reminded that beyond the church and academy, not many people even recognise the subject on which I spend most of my time. The first time I gave one of these talks, an audience member responded: "Theology Miss. Is that rocks and stuff?". Scrapping a whole pre-prepared PowerPoint with bitter regret I rolled up my sleeves and corrected the misunderstanding: *theology* is talking, thinking and reasoning about *God*. When you do the same thing with rocks – *that's* geology!

Yet here I am today, again sobered and humbled. From this morning's Gospel it turns out that *rocks* may have more to do with it than I had allowed.

And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.

If you are wise, Jesus thus instructs his disciples in Matthew's Gospel, you will build not only your house, but your church on a rock.

What then is this rock on which Jesus will build his church? This question has consumed the attention of interpreters of all kinds for centuries and the answer divides opinion, people and even Christian denominations one from another. Is the rock foundation for Jesus' church the confession, made a line or so earlier by Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the living God? This *is* the first time in Matthew's narrative when a disciple has recognised Jesus as the Messiah. Is the rock the faith of Peter that brings him to this confession and in which the church can share? Is the rock the ministry of Peter, who having the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven might admit others in contrast to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees who, Matthew tells us "lock people out of the Kingdom". All this wrangling creates a lot of noise but it probably obscures the central point. The rock is Peter himself.

The Greek word which Matthew uses and is translated "rock" is *petra*. A word probably most familiar as the name of the ancient rose red city, so called because it was hewn out of the very rock of the Jordanian desert. Here then Jesus indulges in a pun – a play on words. As Matthew tells it, Jesus says "You are *Petros*" (which we render as Peter) a nickname from *petra*, like 'Rocky' "and on this rock I will build my church." Scripture demonstrates that God likes a nickname (Jacob gets one – it's Israel – and Abraham gets one – it's Abraham, before he got it he was Abram) and no one of sense ever lets a pun – good or bad – go to waste. But a pun is only a good pun if it also has something to say, a meaning to convey. What is it, then, that makes the disciple Simon, *Peter*, what makes him rocky?

It may be, of course, *all* those things over which the interpreters wrangle: his confession, his faith, his ministry. To distinguish Peter the figure, Peter the person from these things is false. Peter is distinguished *by* his confession, by his faith and by his remarkable career. Peter becomes a stone pillar of strength and stability within the early church. His rockiness also implies a resilience. This morning's epistle recalled the

enduring quality of rock. Hit a rock and it will not retaliate, neither will it disintegrate. The letter calls Christians to be “living stones” who, like granite, will withstand harsh treatment without return, as Christ himself did, who is called the cornerstone.

Rocks, however, are not unproblematic and here we have might defer to our geologist friends. Rocks cannot be relied upon. They may be resilient but they are not indestructible. They crumble and fall. A few chapters after Peter’s confession, Jesus warns that even the stones of the Temple will be thrown down, not one left upon another. Rocks are destructive. Young seedlings do not thrive on rocky ground and the efforts of the sower who sowed them are undermined. Rocks are obstructive. A favourite metaphor in scripture is that of the stumbling stone or stumbling block which frustrates human beings in their pursuit of God’s will, for lack of understanding, of faith, of trust. It juts out of the smooth path of discipleship like a broken paving slab and you just cannot get around it! The wise man might build his house upon the rock but the *wiser* man knows that the rocks of that foundation may be shaken and split. Matthew gives us one picture at the moment of Jesus’ death, when rocks split with apparently as much ease the rending of the Temple curtain. The tragic images from the past few days in Afghanistan show us another picture. Rocks are complicated.

We see this complication in Peter too. Only a few verses after the Gospel reading we heard this morning, Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting his own suffering and death and consequently Jesus rebukes Peter “Get behind me Satan” and declares Peter a stumbling block for setting his mind on earthly rather than heavenly things. Peter gets things wrong and sets a bad example. Peter will crumble like weathered rock after Jesus’ arrest, denying three times that he knows him. If Peter is rock then he isn’t granite or marble.

He may have more in common with the sedimentary limestone of the region descending from Mount Hermon in the North of the Golan Heights, which gives Caesarea Philippi its characteristic geology. Like sedimentary rock, which is so much compressed sand, chalk and shell, Peter builds up bit by bit. It takes him a while to

catch on but his understanding accumulates. Even when caught up in a spectacular Houdini-style jail break, as we heard from the book of Acts, Peter does not immediately grasp the situation but *eventually* comes to himself and becomes sure. He steps onto the water but becomes afraid and sinks to be rescued by his saviour and make it in the end. He asks his Lord to explain the parables that he ought (it is implied) already to have grasped but receives his explanation. No, Peter is not granite but for all his mistakes, his malleability, his accumulation; he is not disqualified.

It is Peter's rockiness in all its aspects that qualify him as the foundation of the Church. It is in Peter's geology that we are reminded how, as we heard in the Gospel, Peter is not – or not only – rock but "flesh and blood." His confession is not the result of his own intelligence or endeavour but is revealed by our Father in heaven. Peter does not dictate to heaven but his decisions have weight *because* they will be bound or loosed in heaven. Peter illustrates that ultimate dependence on God which makes him the proper foundation of the church which is upheld by God in all its rockiness and for us with our failings as well as our strengths.

In 1841 this church was built on a foundation of – so far as quite some time on Google has allowed me to ascertain – not on granite but a mixture of London clay, brickearth, alluvium and gravel. It seems to me that there could be no more appropriate foundation for a church dedicated to Rocky himself. With Peter for Patron, we are encouraged to strive for strength, certainly; for endurance, firmness and faith. We might also be comforted in our crumbling and our reliance on the ultimate foundation of Christ, Son of the living God.