

Sermon, St Peter & St Paul, 27 June 2021

Matthew 16, v13-19

Now, we are celebrating St Peter's day. Peter and his brother Andrew, both fishermen were the first two disciples who Jesus called to follow him. Peter's original name was Simon, but Jesus changed it to Peter, which comes from the Greek word meaning rock. This was intended as a sign that whatever his weaknesses at the time when he became a disciple, Peter would turn into the rock-like, fearless character around which the church would be built.

In all the lists of the apostles Peter is always put first and it is clear the writers of the Gospels regarded him as the chief apostle. He was one of three; the others were James and John, who Jesus allowed to be present on very important occasions. It was these three who were present at the Transfiguration and who were with Jesus when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, just before he was arrested and crucified.

We learn from the gospel today that Peter was the first to realise that Jesus was more than a prophet and that he was the long awaited Messiah. The gospel describes how, after Peter had proclaimed "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" Jesus replied, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."

Peter plays a part in many of the Gospel stories and in the early part of the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel's show him as a very loveable person. He is full of energy and is determined to use it in the service of his master, but sometimes he loses courage, as when he denied that he knew Jesus after his arrest. I always find the celebration so encouraging. Here's someone who went to the lengths of denying his association with Jesus and yet who despite this, Jesus regarded as a rock on whom he would build his church.

So, in the end, it is not because of our perfect observance of religious practice that we are set free from our insecurities, but by trusting the love of God. From Peter and his failings we learn about the complexities of people who, says Williams, may be admirable and generous in some ways and deeply flawed in others. Oh, Peter grew a long way beyond his early failings and achieved extraordinary things for the faith. How often we put ourselves down. As Daniel O'Leary says, "In my pastoral experience a common cry from those seeking a fuller life is an inbuilt sense of inferiority and the fear of being judged.....we do not believe that even our best is ever good enough."

But, we do not have to do it all. We keep forgetting that there is an undercurrent of divinity in our lives. That God-given love shapes, guides and empowers everything we are called to, fashioned for, drawn towards and it shapes in us an infinite destiny. Jesus could see this in Peter and this is how the gift is given through God's belief in us. To us it is a sudden illumination, the opening of the heart to the risk of love. Are we open to sacrificing what we are for what we may become?

Jesus could see this in Peter, who went ahead to take the risk and follow Jesus. And the church is there to reveal to us another courageous way of living; a way of believing in the light while it is still dark. Jesus hated clerical hypocrisy. He had little interest in the trappings of religion. His passion was for the utter authenticity of people's lives. There can be no other way than authenticity for Christians to experience abundant life before we die, no other way to do God's will, no other way to be broken and refashioned like the surrendered Jesus on the cross, no other way to flesh again the wonderful word of truth into our church.

St Peter's recognition of who Jesus was is such an important moment in the understanding of his true nature. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus determined to demand a verdict from his disciples. He must know before he set out to Jerusalem and the cross if anyone had dimly grasped who and what he was.

So this recognition of who Jesus was is such an important moment in the unfolding of his true nature. He did not ask the question directly; he led up to it. He began by asking what the people were saying about him, and who they took him to be. The stage reached in the popular estimate of Jesus was of moderately tense expectancy. He seemed to be bringing the promised kingdom nearer and therefore he might well be one of those Old Testament figures who it was believed would return to earth as a herald of the new age.

Indeed, John the Baptist had appeared to fulfil so faithfully the traditional role of a prophet, and had proclaimed such an urgent message that some said that Jesus might even be a reincarnation of him. When Jesus had heard the verdict of the crowds he asked the all important question “And you, who do you say that I am?” Then Peter makes his confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

In the Acts we meet Peter again. After he has encountered the risen Christ he fears nobody and with Paul was largely responsible for spreading the Christian faith and was a central figure in the early church. Peter met his own death during the anti-Christian persecutions of the Emperor Nero, probably in AD64 in Rome. He gave his life into the hands of God. As Janet Morley writes in ‘All Desires Known’,

*I was nothing but letting go and being held
and there were no words and we flowed
and I was given up to the dark
and in the darkness I was not lost
and the wanting was like fullness
and I could hardly hold it and I was held
and you were dark and warm
and without time and without words
and you held me*

So Peter gives himself into the hands of God

Revd Anne Hoad