



Sermon: - 3rd September 2017

Rock and Stumbling Block

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16: 13-28

Don't you just love Peter? He always cheers me up. It's because he never gets it quite right, does he? One minute he's jogging along quite happily thinking he understands, thinking he's getting it, thinking, this stuff is all beginning to make sense, and then, just when he least expects it, he does something impetuous, which doesn't turn out as well as it might, and he trips and falls.

This morning's gospel reading shows the two sides of Peter. We read of Peter's confession of Christ. Matthew tells us that Jesus responds to Peter's statement "You are the Christ" by saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

What affirmation! To be described as a rock! Peter must have felt smug, like a prize pupil, top of the class, perhaps he was thinking, "I've really understood, I've arrived, I get it..." But pride comes before a fall and in the very next sentence he is brought low. Jesus speaks plainly about his death and Peter, perhaps in the confidence of having said something Jesus approved of, perhaps thinking about this Church that Jesus is going to build, takes him aside and begins to rebuke him. And that's not really so surprising is it, given that Jesus was talking about building something up, something good and wonderful, and now he seemed to be talking about throwing it all away. What a waste? Not to mention that Peter loves Jesus and doesn't want him to suffer. So, Peter jumps in and dares to chastise Jesus.

But this time Jesus reacts so differently from before, not, "these words are given to you by God!", but "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." How devastating for Peter, first unlooked-for praise, swiftly followed by unlooked-for censure. Poor Peter, he must have felt bewildered. How could he get it so right and then so quickly get it so wrong? One minute he is the rock on which Jesus will build his church, and the next he is a stumbling block. Something which gets in the way and trips people up. A burden, a problem, like the millstone Jesus refers to elsewhere.

Think of another instance too, when Peter says vehemently that he will go to his death for Jesus, that he will never leave him, and then, scant hours later, denies that he knows Jesus. Oh Peter, when will you learn to think before you speak? Words, once out cannot be retracted. Do we not say, “least said, soonest mended”? We are inclined to think of that saying as referring to gossip, or harsh words in an argument, but as we can see from the example of Peter today, it can mean a whole variety of things, and sometimes our words only hurt ourselves, not anyone else.

I wonder how many of you are Harry Potter fans? If you have seen the films or read the books you might recall the number of times Hagrid the gamekeeper, in conversation with Harry and his friends lets slip some piece of important, and secret, information. “Shouldn’t have said that! I should not have said that!” is his refrain. It’s a sensation that Peter would have been all too familiar with.

Can you imagine his feelings? Do we ever feel like that? Why, oh why didn’t I stop to think? What possessed me? What was I thinking? Or not thinking?

Can you sympathise with Peter? Do you sometimes wish that the ground would open up and swallow you? That you could rewind time? 5 mins, 10 mins? Watch what you say, you just might regret it. Think before you speak. Guard your tongue; it is a mighty weapon, for good and for ill. One unguarded moment, one thoughtless word or ill-considered phrase and the damage is done, the rock has become a stumbling block. We have hurt someone, or hurt ourselves, damaged our reputation, our relationships. The word of God may be sharper than a two-edged sword, as the letter to the Hebrews tells us, but our words also are two edged swords – an edge that cuts for good, and an edge that cuts for ill!

But, like Peter, we are only human, there will be times when we get it wrong, make mistakes, so how do we cope with our faults and failings? The passage from Romans makes it pretty clear how we can keep from damaging our relationships and our reputation. “Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.” But it does sound like a tall order, doesn’t it? Honour one another above yourselves? Live in harmony with one another. Everyone? All the time? We’re bound to get it wrong from time to time. It is not possible to live up to that ideal. And when we get it wrong, as Peter did in this incident we read of today, there is a temptation to get stuck. We are ashamed, or upset, or

discouraged, and we can't see a way out, or a way forward. We become paralysed by our fault, by our failing, and that is almost worse than the mistake we made in the first place. If we fall in the mud, the last thing we need to do is to stay in the mud. But what do we do? What did Peter do?

The good news in this incident is that Peter did become a rock for the early church, and not a stumbling block, in spite of all his mistakes, and as we know this was not the last one. He picked himself up and carried on. He could have allowed his mistakes to dictate what he did next. He could have decided that there was no point in going on, in continuing to follow Jesus if he was going to keep getting things so wrong. But he didn't. And, when we make mistakes, it's not the end for us either. The good news is that Jesus restores relationships and builds bridges, if we let him. The evidence is that Jesus takes our faults and failings, our blips and bloopers, our sins, our problems, our fragility and weakness and transforms all these things through his love. If we admit to the mistakes we've made, and own up to our weaknesses, our faults and failings, and keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep following, keep trusting, keep praying, keep holding on.

When we get it wrong, he forgives us. When we say or do the wrong thing, he heals us. When we misunderstand, he understands. When we destroy he builds up, when we break he mends, when we alienate he reconciles, if we let him, if we turn to him, if we admit our fault, if we put our trust in him, call upon him, let him work in us.

So, we can learn from Peter's example. We can aim to be a rock and not a stumbling block, to ourselves or others. I once heard that before you say anything you should ask yourself three questions, "is it true, is it kind, is it helpful!" It would be good if we could do that, although all too often, I think the words are out perhaps even before we realise what we have said. But if we do fall and fail, if we do make mistakes, or even if we deliberately set out to hurt and harm, which, sadly, sometimes we might do, out of hurt, or anger, when we find ourselves stumbling blocks instead of rocks, we can still rely on the support and forgiveness and reconciliation offered by Jesus if we have the humility to admit that we are wrong, and face up to our mistakes.

Then we can come to him, for help and healing, the true rock, the cornerstone of the Kingdom, come to him, where stumbling blocks are turned into rocks, where we are turned into rocks, allowing him to transform us, as he transformed Peter, into the foundations of the kingdom.