Sermon at the Anglican Church, St Peter the Fisherman, Whitianga, to be delivered on Sunday 27th August 2023, by Dr. Maxwell Reid.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 16, 13-20.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 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, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

This story has confused me in the past, because we talk here about Simon, and also of Peter. Jesus actually renamed Simon as Peter and this morning I’ll explain why. I’m talking about our very own St Peter the Fisherman of whom our church is named. They are the same person. The person who starts off in the story as Simon, receives a reward for his courage and astuteness, to be renamed by Jesus as Peter, the rock on which he will build his church.

The story begins when Jesus and his disciples came to the region of Caesarea Philippi in northern Israel, a city built by Herod Philip the tetrarch on a plane about 1100 feet above sea level at the foot of Mount Hermon. The location is 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and this is the site of an ancient spring. It was here that Jesus took his disciples to to spread his message, revealing his identity to them as the Messiah, the Son of God.

The disciples and the large crowds that followed him, later informed him of the circulating undermining reports and undercurrents about him. It followed that Jesus was well informed and made all too aware of these political overtones in the Pharisees public attempts to discredit him. Sometimes nowadays it is described as the tall poppy syndrome. It was actually more serious than that, this upstart was challenging their historical powers, and his powers were as we know, being constantly revealed as pretty impressive.

By this stage of his mission, Jesus already knew that he had the propensity to stir up considerable controversy. Because of the doubts and slurs cast by the current teachings and put downs of the Jewish leaders, Jesus asked the disciples for some feedback, not from these Pharisees and Sadducees, but what the people of Caesarea thought. Who do these people say the Son of Man is? Some of the disciples reported what they had heard as to who these people thought he was. John the Baptist for a start. Others said Elija, and still others, Jeramiah. That’s all very well he replied, but who do you say I am.

Well, this question certainly had the disciples scratching their heads. If you remember, Simon, James and John were there on the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus, so they knew perfectly well that Jesus was not Elijah or Moses because they saw the three of them together! Also, those who witnessed the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist knew equally well that Jesus was not John the Baptist.

We might view this report of the disciples as an invitation for them to engage in a somewhat critical dialogue with other perspectives and views, but the disciples were silent, without offering any opinion of their own. The exception was Simon, who broke the silence, and for the first time, emerged as the spokesperson for the Twelve of them. Emphatically, Simon said, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God”. Jesus blessed Simon, presumably for being the one with a courageous and as we know, correct answer.

Jesus hadn’t forgotten the previous encounter with the Spirit of God, descending on him like a dove, and the voice from heaven saying this is my son etc. so he chose to ignore the answers from the other disciples, because in his view Simon came up with the right answer. Simon was praised by Jesus, and because of his courageous and faithful testimony, Jesus renamed Simon as Peter.

Jesus responded to Simon’s statement, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Johnah, you are Peter, (which is translated as Petros in Greek, which means rock) and on this rock I will build my church. Jesus’ statement did not tell Peter that he was a rock, or even that he had rocklike qualities. He just gave Simon this new name of Peter with a new role, empowering him with a new identity. Peter had not assumed the name and role himself, instead, the name was conferred on him by Jesus, together with the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the keys that would open the gates to those whoever deserved to enter. That’s our Peter, the simple fisherman, who was then to become the very foundation of Jesus’ church. Jesus portrayed such a rock that not even the forces of death could prevail.

Having the keys to the kingdom I guess left an indelible mark on history whereby it is now commonplace to hear stories about meeting St Peter at the pearly gates. Well, he was given the keys to heaven, so I guess that perhaps, this was the point of origin of the stories and jokes about meeting St Peter at the pearly gates.

Christ declared that he was going to build a church with the apostles, in which they would continue to proclaim his message and establish his church throughout the known world. Consequently, as Christians, everything we do today is based not only on Christ’s work, but also on the work and teachings of those apostles, who were commissioned by Christ, and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

In those days, history was handed down verbally, until finally people like Matthew, Luke, John, Mark decided to record the message in the form of the gospels, along with Paul who wrote letters. As such, Matthew left the message that we read in today’s gospel that entailed what Jesus said; when you have treated the stranger or foreigner, the imprisoned, those with no homes, the hungry, you have done so to me.

As we know, Jesus ascended, he went home to God with his work well done. Now we live in this post resurrection world where we too, like his disciples must take on the responsibility of his message. As his modern disciples, we also have the keys to the kingdom. Yes, we can follow his wishes and try to build our church on the ideal utopia of a rock-solid foundation, but the question is, what sort of church did Jesus intend it to be? Define rock-solid. What exactly did he mean?

My take on this is that on this rock, we must not build a prison nation, where there is no freedom of speech or no freedom to leave, or a society where justice is the privilege of the dominant and powerful, who have the power to enact unjust laws that impact the most vulnerable among us. On this rock, we must not allow our present civilization to be a nation where millions of men, women and children are homeless and hungry, and without clean, affordable water. Our churches should not oppress the poor, and especially women, as is the case in many countries and religions. Furthermore, we cannot turn a blind eye toward sexual violence, slavery and injustice. On this rock, let us build assemblies that demonstrate such a belief in a living, speaking, incarnating God, a God of freedom and not one of oppression, a God of justice, love, and peace.

Jesus didn’t choose rich and powerful influencers for his work. He chose ordinary flawed people, like Peter the Fisherman, like us, to spread his word to other ordinary people, who would then move it, like a Tsunami, throughout the world.

Today, I leave you with this thought: We are also modern disciples of Jesus. In this age of unprecedented education, technology and wealth (well, wealth compared to those days), we must not make hollow promises, I allude to what Mary Poppins called piecrust promises, that is those that are easily made and easily broken. We must build our faith on a rock like foundation, we must build our faith with the moral requirement to do what we can to help the less fortunate and underprivileged in our society. Jesus challenged us to look out for the most vulnerable with compassion, justice, and human care, without the punitive unjust laws and customs of past civilisations, many of which cannot be condoned or forgotten. If society does not learn from the mistakes of the past, sadly, society will keep making such mistakes. What we all must aspire to is a Christian life in which one loves the other as much as one might love oneself. If we can build a church on such a rock-like foundation with the attributes that Jesus intended, then we can be proud of ourselves by leading a life that can be an example to all.

Amen