

THE CHURCH'S FOUNDATION

Sermon preached at All Saints Rothbury on Sunday 29th June 2008 - which was observed as the feast of **St Peter and St Paul**.

It was a Red Letter Day as Sue Joyner, Head of Harbottle School, was ordained deacon in the cathedral this morning.

But you - who do you say that I am?

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Peter makes an orthodox statement of who Jesus is; but Matthew later makes it clear that Peter doesn't properly understand what Jesus, the Messiah, is to do. Indeed, none of the disciples at that point had any real understanding of the divinity of Jesus. Later Jesus says: I am in the Father and the Father is in me. But they really didn't understand. It took 50 years or so before the great prologue to the fourth gospel was written - in the beginning was the Word - when the whole cosmic nature of Jesus was began to become clear.

The setting for this most important conversation with the disciples is in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi, about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee, had earlier been the site of a Baal worship centre, then the god Pan had been worshipped in the famous grotto and spring there. The town there was renamed by Herod the Great after he built a temple to Caesar Augustus there. After Herod's death it was made part of the territory of his son Philip, who enlarged the town and named it after Tiberius Caesar and himself. It is a place steeped in idolatry and spiritualism.

Matthew brings the scene of the confession that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah into the shadow of a Caesar's temple, where the Roman destroyers of Jerusalem had celebrated their victory, a revered site long associated with both pagan and Jewish history. A word from heaven itself to illuminate the darkness of evil.

Jesus asked the disciples: "OK guys, what are they saying about me?" Not I think because he himself wants to know - I expect he heard all the gossip. Rather, he wanted to get them thinking about himself and his role. Sure, they loved him as a friend, and revered him as a teacher and wonder worker. He had great attractiveness, and people came to him and followed him around for all sorts of reasons. But **you**, says Jesus. You, my close friends who know me better than all these others - who do you think I am.

Was there an anxious silence? Was there a shuffling of feet and a looking down on the ground, and a desperate hope that someone else would answer? I rather think so. But Peter - perhaps because he couldn't bear the silence and felt that someone had to say *something* said "You are the messiah - the son of the living God".

Confessing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, may be easy within the walls of our own church. What if we went to the front of a strip-tease bar or went to a New Age temple or an astrologist's office or the synagogue or a significant public building? What would we be prepared to say about Jesus in places like that? Perhaps if we went as a group we might feel strong enough. Perhaps not.

Note that Peter didn't just say "Son of God" - but "Son of the **living** God". And it is only in Matthew that we get the phrase "Son of the living God".

Are we supposed to see immediately the contrast between the living God and the places and people serving dead idols. It can certainly be more difficult to believe in the power of the living God when we are surrounded by the evil that roams in this world - in Zimbabwe, in Afghanistan or Iraq, can't it? Or in apparently Godless places where everything is placed on the altar of the bottom line?

How does Jesus meet this phrase blurted out by the impetuous Simon? "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,

but my Father in heaven". Hey, wow! This is amazing. I've actually got something right - great. But remember another occasion when Jesus actually called Peter 'Satan' for something else he blurted out. This time of course, if we look again at what Jesus said - it wasn't **Simon** at all who got it right. He was declaring what God had put into his mind.

And Jesus goes on to say something which must have seemed a bit weird to the disciples: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church". For a start, I am not sure that the word 'church' (ecclesia) would have been familiar to them. And what is the "rock"?

This Greek word for "rock" Petros is distinguished from the Greek lithos (= "stone") in that Petros is usually a huge, immovable bedrock or mountain and lithos is a smaller and movable stone. And remember, **we** are described elsewhere as living stones. But *here* Jesus means something really big and solid. Matthew probably intended the readers to make connections with this text to his other uses of Petros. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock." And it is the same word for 'build the church' that Jesus uses to Peter in our reading too.

So if Jesus means a real foundation stone, a big, stable rock, then why would he build his church on someone as unstable as Peter? I don't think he does. I think that the rock is Peter's great statement that Jesus is the son of the living God. In other words Jesus refers to Peter's confession or his faith; but not Peter himself. All our hymns today reflect this. The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Yet it is clear that Jesus selected Peter for a great role in this new body - the church. Many people have a hard time accepting that Jesus built and continues to build the church upon and from sinful human beings. When one Lutheran church was seeking a pastor, the elders got this letter from a trainee at a seminary:

For the record, I am 45 years old, three times divorced, four times married, a convicted felon, (homicide,) a biker and a former businessman. I struggled for nearly fifteen years with my sense of call, asking what congregation in their right mind would call ME as a pastor. The answer from a pastor friend of mine was that "the ONLY kind of church that would call me would be one that had real sinners in it, people with real problems who wanted to see the Lord at work in the lives of real people. In other words, the Body of Christ." I liked his answer.

It is a really good answer. What congregation in their right mind would want Peter as their pastor? Most of the time when he spoke, he said the wrong things. As I have pointed out, Jesus even called him "Satan!" He publicly denied knowing Jesus three times. Yet, he is the foundation Jesus is building his church on. Couldn't Jesus have picked someone better?

Peter was certainly a person who acted on Jesus' words - but he didn't seem to be the sharpest knife in the drawer. For example wanting to build three booths at the transfiguration, or chopping off the ear of the servant at Jesus' arrest. But he **acted**.

And the disciples tended to follow his lead. After the resurrection, when Jesus seemed to have gone away again, he said "I'm going back fishing" - almost a loss of faith as it was going back to his old job - and the rest went along with him. He was a leader.

In the epistle we see Peter being arrested and thrown in prison. At Pentecost we see Peter preaching to thousands as if he had been born to it.

So where does all this leave us?

We are at Caesarea Philippi - we are in a world that worships almost anything else but the living God. And this morning Jesus says to me and to you: But you - who do you say that I am?

And I would remind you all that all are called to serve him. All of us are called to be living stones in the temple that is his church - his body here on earth. And the church is made up of sinners, me you, all of us. Of ourselves, under our own steam, none of us should be here. But Jesus calls us and has forgiven us - yes - forgiven us. So often we fail to forgive ourselves. But God has forgiven us. That's why we burst into song after the absolution - a song of praise and joy for that great gift of forgiveness.

And God gives all of us what the great ordination prayer calls "the needful gifts of his grace".

Needful? Oh yes! I couldn't speak without God helping me with the study and the words. None of us can do God's work without the gift of his grace - his amazing, refreshing and strengthening and encouraging grace.

So on this day when we rejoice that Peter and Paul answered the call and were faithful, when we rejoice that men and women all over God's earth are answering the call today to the ordained ministry in the church of God, let us ask ourselves again: But you - who do you say that I am?

And having made our answer - we remember that God has a task and a role for each one of us. In the quiet that follows this sermon, say with the boy Samuel in your heart:

"Speak Lord - for your servant is listening."