

PETER, 'THE ROCK'

Isaiah 51. 1-6

Romans 12. 1-8

Matthew 16. 13-20

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our gospel passage opens in Caesarea Philippi, which is situated about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Earlier, Caesarea Philippi had been a site for pagan worship, first of Baal, and then of the Greek god Pan. Herod the Great built a temple there to Caesar Augustus; and 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. Caesarea Philippi – a curious place. At one time, it was a vacation spot for the Roman general Vespasian; but it was also known for being the place where Jewish captives were thrown to wild animals after the fall of Jerusalem. It is here, in Caesarea Philippi, a site with many pagan and Jewish associations, that St Matthew sets the scene for the revelation of our Lord as the Messiah.

When Jesus asks his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?', he gets all sorts of answers. Apparently people have high opinions of Christ's identity. The common denominator of all of those named is not only that they are prophets (and important ones at that), but that they are all already dead and presumed to be resurrected.

When our Lord asks, 'But who do you say that I am?', it is Simon Peter who answers for the whole group, saying, 'You are the Messiah, you are the Son of the living God.' Peter is right of course, and he has received this insight from God alone. This truth is not something that he has concluded by himself, after careful thought and reflection; rather, it is a divine revelation, a gift that has been given to him. And Jesus

then pronounces a singular blessing upon Peter. As he utters his dramatic words about Christ being the Messiah and the Son of the living God, Peter is told that he is going to play a unique and unrepeatable role in the founding of the new Christian community.

This role of Peter is expressed using three images. Firstly, he is the rock on which the Church will be built by our Lord. The name 'Peter' means 'stone' or 'rock'; and it is unfortunate that the English translations of our gospel passage insist on inserting the word 'Peter', because they then miss the play on words of the initial text. Christ actually said to Peter in Aramaic, 'You are Rock (*kepha* or *cephas*), and on this rock I will build my church'. Peter here is pictured as the foundation of the church.¹ As we consider this picture, we are perhaps reminded of another verse in St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he writes, 'So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets*, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone' (2. 20).

Whilst Peter is called the foundation of the church, our Lord is actually its builder. Thus Peter does not compete with Jesus. Christ himself is portrayed here as the one who constructs the new Christian community, which is pictured as a building. The underlying image is one of a holy temple, composed of the true people of God; and

¹ This passage was not used for support of the papacy until the third century and later, and then was opposed by leading figures such as Origen and Augustine. In the seventeenth century, when this text was reinterpreted by Roman Catholic scholars as referring to the founding of the papacy, this interpretation was opposed by Protestant scholars, who then denied that the passage referred to Peter as the foundation for the church at all. It has become traditional in Protestant polemics to point out the distinction between the masculine 'petros' and the feminine 'petra' to support the view that Matthew means that the church is built on Peter's confession or his faith, rather than on Peter himself.

This is a distinction in the Greek language, however, and the form shows that the name was originally given in Aramaic. In any case, the conversation did not occur in Greek, but in Jesus's and Peter's native Aramaic. The Greek distinction then becomes irrelevant.

1 Cor 3. 11, which is often cited to show that Peter could not be meant as the foundation on which the church is built, may be a Pauline reaction to and is very idea promulgated by Peter's disciples in Corinth. On the other hand, Eph 2. 20 and Rev 21. 14 show that the founding generation of apostles played a unique role in the origin of the church and could be pictured as its foundation. In Mt 16. 18 this apostolic role is focused uniquely on Peter.

this temple is nothing other than God's dwelling-place. God is present with, and inhabits the people of his Church;² and this Church will always endure and never be vanquished.³

Secondly, Peter has been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is represented here by authoritative teaching, teaching that lets heaven's power rule in earthly things. The image of Peter with the keys is not that of the doorkeeper to heaven; his function is not to decide in the afterlife who is admitted and who is denied entrance to heaven. Peter's role as the holder of the keys is fulfilled now, on earth, as chief teacher of the Church.

And thirdly, when our Lord says to Peter that 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven', the language of 'binding and loosing' is terminology used by rabbis to describe authoritative preaching, and having the authority to interpret the Torah and apply it to particular cases, declaring what it permitted and what is not permitted. Jesus, who has taught with authority (Mt 7. 29) and who has given authority to his disciples (Mt 10. 1,8), here gives Peter the primary disciple the authority to teach in his name; and to make authoritative decisions pertaining to Christian life as he applies the teaching of Christ to concrete situations in the life of the Church.⁴

For generations, this passage in Matthew's gospel has been a bone of contention between Protestants and Roman Catholics, with differing interpretations in terms of doctrine. One of the achievements of contemporary ecumenical scholarship, however, is that both Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars generally agree that the original meaning of the text is that Christ builds the Church on Peter as the foundation, rather than on Peter's confession or Peter's faith; and that the position

² Cf. also Eph 2. 21-22.

³ The 'gates of Hades' (16. 18) is a Biblical expression that can mean the 'gates of death' (not punishment). Cf. Job 38. 17; Ps 9. 13; Ps 107. 18).

⁴ This authority first becomes effective after the resurrection of Christ (cf. Mt 28. 16-20).

Peter held was unique and unrepeatable. The text pictures Peter as playing a unique and unrepeatable role in the foundation of the Church. Later theology – whether it be Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant – developed this meaning in its own ways, but there is now a general consensus as to the original meaning.

For contemporary Christians, this means that the text need not have the polemical edge that it used to have in various theological debates; rather, it can be heard as the promise of our Lord to build his Church, despite the spiritual forces that are arrayed against it. The Church can take heart from this promise.

Before closing, I would simply like to point out again that when Peter stated that Christ is the Messiah and the Son of the living God, he received this insight from God himself. How we identify our Lord, and how we think about him, should be formed by our personal encounters with God. How we identify Jesus should be grounded in a life-long conversation with God. I wonder, what has God been telling us lately about his Son?

Our God is the living God, and he is not a static God whose communication stopped in the past, long ago. Christ is the Messiah, the Son of the living God; and this means that God continues to speak and to act. And this means that he will continue to speak to us, his people, and to act in our midst.

Amen.