

SERMON/REFLECTIONS TRINITY 11 WEEK 21 YEAR A 23 AUGUST 2020

Two weeks ago the gospel reading was about the disciples encountering a storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus walking on the water, and Peter going out towards him. The account ended with the storm subsiding and the disciples worshipping Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Today’s gospel reading, sometimes called ‘the confession at Caesarea Philippi’ (confession in the sense of confessing the faith, not confessing sin) has a couple of similarities. Once again Peter plays an important part. And again there is an acknowledgement of who Jesus is, this time on the lips of Peter rather than coming from the disciples more generally: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Revelation, disclosure, is a feature of both occasions. Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm revealed to the disciples something about who he was. And Jesus says that his Father in heaven has revealed to Peter the truth he has just uttered. He then goes on to say, with a wordplay, that Peter is the rock on which he will build his church. That is the natural understanding of Jesus’ words, though some Christians, uncomfortable with the idea that anyone other than Jesus could be a foundation of the church, suggest it is the faith expressed by Peter that is the rock on which the church is built. Other Christians go too far in the opposite direction, and believing S. Peter to have been the first Pope (Bishop of Rome), assert that Jesus’ words give supreme authority on earth to the papacy. This is not justified by a thoughtful reading of the gospel, or indeed the New Testament as a whole. The first record we have of Jesus’ words being used to claim a special place in the church for the Bishop of Rome dates from the year 256. How were they understood for the previous 200 years?

All the indications are that Peter is in some senses the leader of the twelve disciples. He is one of those closest to Jesus, with James, John and sometimes Andrew. More of his words are reported than of the others. He is a spokesman. The book of Acts shows his leadership continues after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, despite his denials which are reported in all the gospels. *Acts* records some of his speeches and incidents in which he is involved. If we read between the lines of the New Testament, it is apparent that there are different groups and opinions in the infant church, some fairly cautious, others embracing change. The church would be like that for the next two thousand years. Peter appears as someone roughly in the middle; also someone aware, after several events, of his own failings. He is sensitive to the opinions of others, for which he is sometimes criticised. He is sincere. When he is convinced some change is God’s will, like the inclusion of

Gentiles in the church, he supports it. Perhaps Jesus is saying that openness, even vulnerability, rather than authority or over-confidence should be the basis on which the church is to be built. And that does not exclude boldness when proclaiming the gospel.

S. Paul did not always agree with S. Peter – I discussed this when we were keeping the feast of S. Peter and S. Paul at the end of June – but he describes diligence as the quality leaders of the Christian community should exercise. That is in our New Testament reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Peter could certainly be described as diligent – hardworking and careful – in his concern for others, even if some of his personal reactions were less than careful. Paul sets out a list of functions within the body of Christ which he describes as gifts from God. 'We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.'

I don't think Paul is being systematic or exhaustive in his list of functions. Some of them come with a bit of explanation: those who prophesy (that is give a message, preach) should do so in proportion to their faith. Other functions aren't explained: teachers should exercise their gift by teaching, for example. Some functions are for a limited number of church members: leadership is an obvious example. Other functions could be exercised by everyone: giving or exhortation, encouragement, for example. And there's no specific reference here to evangelism, though Paul lists it elsewhere. We can imagine him enthusiastically dictating his letter to a scribe, walking up and down the room as he does so. His thinking is inspired but not always tidy.

What comes over in today's passage is Paul's earnest desire that all Christians should respond to God's grace. They should not be 'conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of their minds.' That will result naturally in them using the graces God has given them for building up the Christian community. To use a modern phrase, Paul is describing 'every member ministry'.

There are two specific challenges to many parish churches today in Paul's outlook. Many people basically come to church because it's a pleasant social gathering. Nothing wrong with that, but we have to move beyond it, and put our gifts to God's service by serving our brothers and sisters. We will discover it is fulfilling. And secondly, we must not leave the task of ministry to a few church members. It's not a free for all – it needs coordinating – but the structures exist for that. Those structures need to be flexible, but if they are, and the people are willing, we shall God's work continuing as it did through the witness of his servants of old, Peter and Paul.