

Rocks and stones. That's where I'm starting today, and I'll do so by looking back at last week's gospel reading, which comes immediately before today's reading from S. Matthew. Last week Jesus said to a disciple, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." There's a wordplay as I said last week. Peter is *Petros* and rock is *petra* in the Greek of the New Testament.

A rock, or a stone, is hidden in today's gospel reading. It's the hyphenated term, stumbling-block. When Peter tries to dissuade Jesus from following a course that would lead to his death, Jesus says to him,

Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me... .

Literally the word means 'a stone to trip over.' It's used in this sense in the scriptures Jesus and the disciples would have known – our Old Testament – particularly in the prophet Isaiah and the Psalms. The word is actually *skandalon*, almost identical to our English word 'scandal'. We talk of a scandal bringing someone down, though it doesn't seem to happen to English politicians and their advisers these days.

Rather surprisingly to our way of thinking, in the Old Testament the term is applied to God: he is a stumbling block to those who forsake his ways of justice and righteousness. Isaiah, writing at a time when the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah were largely disregarding God's law, said this:

For both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over (Isaiah 8.14).

Isaiah's message was the nation that rejected God would come to grief.

There is of course another sense in which rock or stone is used as a symbol: that is, as a cornerstone, a foundation stone, which holds the structure together. Quoting Isaiah again,

Thus says the Lord God, "See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation..." (Isaiah 28.16).

In one of the psalms (118.22) there is a combination of the two symbolic senses: both a stumbling-block and a cornerstone:

The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.

The original reference was probably to the victory in battle of a faithful king; the builders who rejected him being his enemies. The verse is quoted by Jesus later in S. Matthew's gospel (21.42) after he's told the parable of the tenants in the vineyard, who end up killing the owner's son:

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; – this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?"

Matthew reports that when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

I'm sorry that the sermon so far has been rather dense, hopping around the scriptures. Basically, as a symbol, 'stone' can mean something you trip over, or something that is a foundation. Jesus applied both these senses to himself. The first line of a hymn we sing occasionally is 'Christ is our cornerstone'. I don't think anyone's written a hymn that begins 'Christ is our stumbling-block'.

Taking last week's gospel and this week's together, Jesus uses the rock or stone symbol in both senses for Peter as well. Peter was to be the rock on which the church would be built, but he was a stumbling-block to Jesus' accomplishing his work. Though he was far from perfect, Peter was nevertheless chosen and empowered for God's purposes. The same could be said for us, who are now Christ's presence on earth.

If we are faithful in what we show other people of Christ in our lives, there will be times when people find him a stumbling-block. He is a challenge to many things that people hold dear: lifestyles, attitudes to wealth and possessions, self-advancement, what's important in relationships and so on. He calls us to a life marked by prayer, humility and a willingness to forgive. As we heard in today's gospel he calls his disciples to 'take up their cross and follow him.' We know how often we fall short; no wonder others may not want to embrace such a way of life.

Alas, it is possible for us, the church, to be a stumbling-block for the wrong reasons, as S. Peter was. An obvious example is the way some church members have abused vulnerable people, followed by institutional cover-ups. But there are other less scandalous ways: an unfriendly church, for example, can be a stumbling-block. An insensitive remark or action by a vicar, or another church member, can cause someone to fall away. And thinking more specifically about the example of Peter, we will be obstacles if what we present as Christ's will is actually our unenlightened opinions of what should happen: human rather than divine thinking.

But we need not fall into a deep depression. God's grace is there to redeem our failings. Peter was restored. The act of rejecting Christ, the crucifixion, was in fact the means by which Jesus became

the cornerstone of the Christian community, with whom he shared his life and victory. In his speech on the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared,

Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

God's grace extended even to those who had crucified his Son. A life founded on Christ, lived in a community in which Christ's presence is experienced, is God's will for all. Let's be part of it!