

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 11 WEEK 21 YEAR A 27 AUGUST 2017

In today's gospel we hear how S. Peter gives an answer to Jesus' question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," is his reply. Jesus declares that this insight comes from God. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." He then declares that Peter is the rock on which he will build his church. There's a play on words here. The Greek word for Peter is *Petros*; the word for rock is *petra*.

S. Matthew, the gospel writer knew the Hebrew Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament. His gospel is full of quotations from them. He would have had in mind the cry of a prophet addressing a Jewish community exiled to Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century bc, hoping that they might return and literally rebuild:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you;... .

This was part of the Old Testament reading today. It's good that Isaiah (or second Isaiah to be precise) mentions Sarah, the ancestral mother of the Jewish people, but more frequently references are just to Abraham as the ancestor. He, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, are known as the patriarchs, the father figures of the nation.

The first answers given by the disciples to Jesus' question are all people within the historical Jewish community: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But Peter's reply bursts that category wide open. Peter realises that Jesus, whom he has been following for some time, brings a new movement of God, and is himself intimately related to God. 'Messiah' or 'Christ' means 'anointed one'. Yes, kings and prophets could be described as anointed by God, and in a sense all Israelites could call themselves God's sons or daughters, but to combine the titles Messiah and Son, and to add the description 'living', gives a more than human, more than historical, identity to Jesus. Through him God is acting in the present, in the here and now. A new community, the followers of Jesus, the church, is being formed. Peter is to the Church what Abraham was to Israel: both are called 'rocks'.

Each case is an example of God, or Jesus, sharing a quality of his own nature with a human being. God himself is described as a rock – the writer of Psalm 18 says, 'The LORD is my rock' – and Abraham is called a rock. After one of his parables Jesus describes himself as a stone rejected by builders which becomes the cornerstone, and here he calls Peter a rock. It is not that Abraham replaces God or Peter replaces Jesus; rather God reveals himself to them, and through them

exercises a particular function towards his people. It is clear from the New Testament that Peter was the foremost of the twelve disciples during Jesus' life on earth, and played a leading rôle in the early years of the church which followed.

Both Abraham and Peter had their failings. Nevertheless God called them to fulfil particular rôles for the sake of his people. That is how he is with us. We may be conscious of our inadequacies, but God has a part he wants us to play. So says S. Paul, himself aware of his own failings, in today's New Testament reading. He tells us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, but to realise that we all have different gifts which are to be used for the common good.

There's a tendency in a parish church to come at this from the wrong direction. Vicars are as guilty as anybody. We look at the institution and think, 'Ah, this needs doing; who can we get?' And we hope someone will feel he or she ought to do it. The church sometimes offers training, but often relies on someone coping. That ignores the spiritual dimension. S. Paul starts with the spiritual – the experience Christians have of God's love, of God revealing himself to them, of God sharing his life with them – an experience available in different ways to all, not just to the greats of the faith like Abraham, Peter and Paul. 'Be transformed by the renewing of your minds,' writes Paul. Using gifts for building up the life of the body is a natural response to this experience; indeed Paul calls it our 'spiritual worship'. The model for the church is that of a group of people where God in Christ can be met, and their experience of God is deepened as together they work for the common good. As we get back from whatever our summer break has involved, as the round of meetings takes off again, let's remember that whatever little we can do can be a loving response to God's love for us.