



***Rocks and stones***

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**21st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**27 August 2017**

***Isaiah 51:1-6***

***Romans 12:1-8***

***Matthew 16:13-20***

A couple of weeks ago Peter got out the boat when Jesus said “Come”. Peter walked a few steps towards Jesus, then looked around, got afraid, and sank.

Every now and then Jesus quizzes his disciples to see how much they are taking in, how well they have understood him. In Today’s Gospel reading Jesus asks “Who do *you* say that I am?” We don’t know how much of a nervous pause there might have been among the disciples as they all wondered who would be brave enough to answer first, but here Peter features again, as he boldly declares Jesus’ identity: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*”. Peter is often the one who responds first to Jesus’ searching questions, often the one that blurts something out, and often the one who later realises the enormity of what he’s said or done and loses his nerve.

Peter’s answer seems to be the one Jesus was looking for, so he responds: “*Simon, son of Jonah, you are favoured indeed!..... You are Peter, the Rock, and on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom.*”

Not much further on, actually part of next week’s Gospel reading, Peter will “stub his toe” on that very rock, for no sooner does he receive his new authority than he begins to argue with Jesus about what’s going to happen in Jerusalem, and Jesus will say “*Out of my sight, Satan; you are a stumbling block to me.*”

So how can Peter be the rock with the right answer, and the stumbling block in the way, both at the same time? How can Peter be given the keys to the kingdom? How can the church be built upon someone who is so unstable?

*“You are Peter (petros, in Greek) and on this rock (petra) I will build my church”*. These two Greek words are the masculine and feminine forms of the word for rock. But there is a difference. *Petros*, the name Jesus gives to Peter, means a stone or a pebble, a small piece of larger rock. *Petra*, on the other hand, means boulder, a great big rock. Peter is blessed because he is a piece from a much bigger rock – the “Rock of Ages” we will sing about later – a “chip off the old block” if you like! Peter may be imperfect, but his authority comes from his recognition of Jesus as the Son of God. And you might have noticed Jesus observe that Peter did not make this assertion on his own: *“You did not learn that from any human being; it was revealed to you by my heavenly Father.”* Peter’s answer was God’s answer, and it is on this *relationship* that the church will be built.

This image of rock is also reflected in our reading from Isaiah this morning. Isaiah encourages the people to *“consider the rock from which you were hewn, the quarry from which you were cut.”* Isaiah is reminding the people of the generations before them, continuing the lineage of the people of God throughout the ages back to Abraham and Sarah. There is a sense of continuity in this rock hewing business: God as the Rock of Ages; Peter as the rock on which Christ will begin to build his church; and disciples through the ages ever since, all hewn from the same rock.

As I went for my walk yesterday morning I found myself wandering above the quarry at the top of the Ngauranga Gorge – the one featured in the Dominion Post last week. I was struck by the sheer enormity of the enterprise. The site is an amazing jungle of mixed up pieces of rock. Beneath the raw rock face was a huge variety of stone in various states of rockiness – piles of boulders, smaller rocks, and stones, as well as mounds of shingle and sand. I witnessed the process of hewing rock from rock – the process of cutting, shaping, crushing and refining – producing different products, all of the one rock, and destined for use in many different ways.

The sight of that quarry reminded me of the passage from Romans today: we may all be hewn from the same “Rock of Ages”, yet we are each shaped and

refined in different ways as we bring our particular skills and passions to God's church. And all parts are needed, all are to be valued, and all are welcome.

The Peter we've heard about in our Gospel readings recently may not seem like the most refined of characters that Jesus chooses to be the rock on which he will build his church, but he is willing to testify that Jesus is the Messiah - he is willing to "put himself out there".

What does "putting ourselves out there" look like for us? Paul phrases it like this: *"Therefore, my friends, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart."*

We are called to be the living presence of Jesus in the world today. Not still or static, but living and growing, learning and exploring, open to new opportunities for renewal of our hearts and minds through the Spirit of God.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor:

*If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for all of us, because he is one of us, because he remains God's chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block, and because he shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness - that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time than we fall.<sup>1</sup>*

The next time someone asks you where you've been on a Sunday morning, or a Thursday morning, or asks you what you believe, or why you bother going to church, go ahead and try to explain. You may feel you stumble over words as you try and articulate why you are drawn here, but then again you might surprise yourself and say something inspired. The important thing is to try. And who knows, maybe your words will sow a seed in someone's heart, that you may or may not see grow.

Next Sunday baby Remy will be baptised as a member of God's church. His family will bring him here for baptism to recognise the link of faith in his family through the generations before him. Who knows where his faith will take him, or what the faith communities he connects with will look like. But

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 2004.

wherever that is, the substance will be the same: people will gather and worship because they, like Peter, recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Today after you've received communion I invite you to collect a stone to take home, to remind us that we are part of the church that Jesus has built. There are four baskets of stones, gathered from over the road at the beach, one at each corner of our worship space this morning. We ourselves are living stones, hewn from the Rock of Ages, and we offer ourselves today as living stones to the mission of the church in this world, in this country, in this place at the bottom tip of the North Island, in this suburb called Eastbourne and the bays. Today, when you get home, put this stone somewhere you'll see it often: on the coffee table, on the kitchen bench beside the kettle, as a paper weight beside the phone. And in the days, weeks, and months ahead, whenever you speak to someone about your faith or tell them where you've been; or share a verse of scripture, a snippet from a sermon, or an insight from God, collect another stone from the beach and place it beside the stone you collected today. Watch how that stone collection will grow, the braver you get in telling people about the gift of your faith.

Today is a day when I tell you NOT to listen to the closing words of today's gospel! Why Jesus instructs his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah is another story, but suffice to say that this instruction needs to be seen in the context of the time – those dangerous days before Jesus went to Jerusalem. There is no such caution for us today! The proclamation of the Gospel is a primary task of the church.

Don't keep your faith a secret – go and tell, go and gather, go and build.

Amen.

