

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 | 27.08.23 at 8am**

Isaiah 51: 1-6; Romans 12: 1-8; St Matthew 16: 13-20

**It doesn't happen very often but when people ask this question I always try to take it seriously.**

**A week or so ago a younger member of the congregation – someone still at school in fact – came to talk to me about the differences between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. They were genuinely concerned about the way King Henry VIII had split away from what they described as 'the one, true Church' – the oldest Church, the one that was founded on the apostles and had an unbroken link right back to Jesus – and they wanted to know what possible justification there could be for the break in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the ongoing life of Anglicanism?**

**Hadn't Jesus been quite clear, as in today's Gospel, that he had entrusted his Church to Peter, nicknamed Cephas, the rock *and on this rock I will build my Church; and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. And to that Church I will give the keys of the Kingdom...***

**You won't be surprised that he left Church, an hour and half later, with a rather more complicated message - and I am glad to say he is still a member of our congregation!**

**Not for nothing do we have to read this morning this amazing passage from Isaiah, chosen to stand alongside the familiar words of Jesus as recorded by St Matthew. Because the world of Isaiah, eight centuries before Christ, is not a million miles away from the world that fills our current newspapers: of former President Trump's arrest in Georgia, the world of Yevgeny Prigozhin blown up in a private jet in his way from Moscow to St Petersburg, the world of Nadine Dorries and her recent resignation letter, the world of the racist killings in Jacksonville, the fires in Canada or the world of Spanish football where Luis Rubiales felt that it was acceptable to kiss one of the Spanish female football stars.**

**Nor is it a million miles away from all the other 'waste places' that we encounter on a daily basis in our own lives as we try to cope with disappointments and difficulties of all sorts – from ill health to the recent hike in tracker mortgage rates which members of my own family were describing when I went up to see them yesterday. How is it possible, they said, that the rates could almost double in just a few short months, just when they are having to rely on maternity pay?**

**How will the Lord comfort his people and restore the fortunes of Zion?**

**For some by providing a kind of linear security. *Lift up your eyes to the heavens, Isaiah writes, and look at the earth beneath. For the earth will wear out like a garment and those who live on it will die like gnats, but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended* – a reassurance drawn from the strength of God to rectify and obliterate all that is corrupt and evil. It is the crossing of the Red Sea, the felling of Goliath, the words of Martin Luther’s hymn, ‘Ein feste burg’:**

***Our God stands like a fortress rock  
with walls that will not fail us;  
he helps us brace against the shock  
of fears which now assail us.  
The tyrants of this age  
strut briefly on the stage:  
their sentence has been passed,  
We stand unharmed at last,  
a word from God destroys them...***

**And my young student was not alone in wanting the security and strength that an historic and unwavering Church could provide. *On this rock, said Jesus.***

**Except that the rock is not what it appears to be: Peter the rock is not the unyielding foundation that one might hope for in the middle of the storm. He isn’t David with his sling shot, Noah before the storm or Moses at the Red Sea: Peter wallows in self-doubt and fear as we saw last Sunday when, jumping over the side of the boat to walk towards Jesus on the waves, he suddenly panics and cries out for help; the same Peter who cowered with fear in the shadow of the Antonio Tower when Jesus was on trial and who denied that he ever knew who he was.**

**Looking with my student at the history of the Church together around a flip chart, there for all to see were endless examples of hopeless weaknesses and compromise, where any claims to consistent faithfulness based on our history alone crumbled away in minutes.**

**So what exactly did Jesus mean and what could I offer my young enquirer? What is Isaiah suggesting when he says, *God’s salvation will be for ever, and his deliverance will never be ended?***

**As so often, St Paul's letter to the Romans gets to the heart of the issue: *so I say to everyone, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but instead, with sober judgement, use the measure of faith that has been assigned to you.***

**What does he mean? And here we need to look at another bit of Paul's advice as found in his second letter to the utterly conceited Church in Corinth where the leadership really did think they had everything sorted.**

**Reflecting on his own life and the way that God had taken him down a peg or three since his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul tells the Corinthians what God had said to him: *Stop thinking you know it all: it is my grace – not your self-confidence – that will enable you to continue. My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect ... in human weakness.***

**Paul then says, *so I have made it my life's work to speak openly about my faults, my failings and my weaknesses because I need to make it plain to all of you that it is only when I admit how out of my depth I am, that Christ's power can be seen to be doing the work that I would like to claim was my own! He has taught me to delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties - for when I am weak, then am I strong.***

**The whole Christian story is not about being tough enough to cope with all the disasters: indeed, it is the exact opposite. It is about identifying what the problems are – and then allowing God's grace to resolve them.**

**As Jesus encouraged Peter to discover. Being called 'the rock' is a rather sad joke: we might almost re-write the passage to something like: *You are Peter and on this 'jelly' I will build my Church: and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.* It isn't the strength of the Peter or the Church, its pure lineage or its best decisions, that matter: it is on its willingness to listen to Jesus and its ability to let his light shine out into the darkness that counts.**

**Fragile, messy and doubting: that is the organisation that Jesus chose to carry his Word. Because only something broken would have enough holes in it for God's love and power to pour out to where it is needed most. In God's way of doing things, we have to put our trust in the least attractive and reliable of institutions to reveal the salvation that God comes to bring.**

**And however strange and uncomfortable this experience may be, this is precisely the journey that St James' is now going through.**

**So instead of Luther's hymn, perhaps this would be more appropriate?**

***Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.***

***Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come.  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far.  
and grace will lead me home.***

***The Lord has promised good to me,  
his word my hope secures;  
he will my shield and portion be  
as long as life endures.***

(Words: John Newton)