

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Nicky Ing - 21st August 2005

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 11: 33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

From earliest times, the ‘rock’ is an Old Testament symbol for God’s unwavering faithfulness to the people of Israel. The Psalm this morning reflects this....the power and strength of God, described as ‘the Rock of our salvation’. *(mention of rocks, collection, personal appreciation of them). Our reading from Exodus, in which the people are beginning to grumble to Moses about the hunger and thirst they are experiencing in the desert, shows how Moses has to ask God what to do in this situation.... ‘(1st case of Pneumonia in Bible....Israelites in the wilderness, a new ‘Moan’ every day!!)’ and he follows God’s instructions and when he strikes the rock with his staff, water flows from the rock and they can drink as much as they need....demonstration of God’s provision for the people in their physical need; **even** when they are ungrateful and complaining, he nevertheless shows his faithfulness to them....but the place where this happened is then given a name, Massah and Meribah, as a sign that the people had quarreled with God and rebelled against him there. (still is known by this name).

The reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans is a most beautiful expression of praise, to the wisdom of God....he asks, ‘**Who could know the mind of the Lord? Or who could ever advise him? Who could ever give him anything?**’ and he ends by acknowledging that all creation has come into being through God: ‘**For from him and through him and to him are all things....To him be the Glory for ever**’. It is very close, isn’t it, to the final words of the Eucharistic Prayera wonderful song of praise to our creator and redeemer.

And then our Gospel reading brings us forward, to Jesus and his conversation with his disciples, and Peter’s recognition and naming of Jesus as the Messiah....And Jesus in turn names Peter as the Rock. Names and naming were very important in the Hebrew tradition....if a name was changed, just as God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, and Jacob’s name to Israel...it meant that the person’s identity, relationships, and calling in life were fundamentally altered. To be given a name was in some way to shape a persons future, or destiny. In giving Simon the new name of ‘Peter’, meaning a rock, Jesus is giving him a new identity, and a new mission.

Of course, it still works that way. At our Baptism, a name is given to us as a response to the gift of faith in Jesus Christ....which is why our first name is also called our ‘Christian Name’. And Peter is the first stone of a building....the community of the church...and we, like Peter, are also called to be living stones, each fulfilling a particular role in Christ’s church, depending on our gifts and abilities. The cornerstone and chief builder of the church is Christ himself, and it continues through space and time... Christ is present, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and there is a continuity of faith, of tradition, and doctrine...and also of people...each of us is connected to those who went before us and those who will come after us...(community of believers).

Jesus commissioned Peter with a task...but Peter didn't yet understand that Jesus would be a suffering Messiah....it was not yet the time for that to be revealed, which was why Jesus did not want the disciples to talk about it. *(explain the 'Messianic Secret). Peter could not have fulfilled his calling without first a 'heart' response to Jesus, and faith, and later the empowering of the Holy Spirit. His initial response to Jesus is to the question Jesus asks him: 'Who do **YOU** say that I am?' It **is** an intensely personal question, isn't it? It is one thing to report what other people are saying about Jesus, but a totally different thing to express our own personal response to Jesus. But this is the question that asks for a response, yours and mine, and we need to consider for ourselves how we can honestly answer this question. Who do **I** say Jesus is? What does Jesus mean in **my** life? How would my life be different without Jesus? Can I say that I experience Jesus personally in my daily living, and have I accepted him as Lord of my life? And if I claim to have faith, what is that doing in my life? Is my faith a living faith? (can anyone see the fruits of it?) Am I sharing my experience of faith, or hiding it where nobody can find it? Is my faith changing the way I live? Is it growing? Do I reach out to others? Am I willing to pray faithfully, and listen to what God is trying to teach me in my life? (No, I'm not trying to send anyone on a guilt trip...these are questions I am asking myself...but it helps to share them with you!) The ways in which we respond to any or all of these questions will be reflected in the way we live our lives, through our ordinary tasks and responsibilities, at home, and where we work, and in the wider community.

There is another thing. Jesus called Peter blessed, and fortunate. Although he was inspired by God in his recognition of Jesus as Messiah, Peter was all too human: like us, he was often impetuous, hot-tempered, he made mistakes,...he even denied Jesus, as we know....but he was generous, enthusiastic, and had gifts of leadership...and many other strengths. Peter was to live a life of poverty, and struggle, pain, conflict and finally to die as a martyr. The way of the cross, the way of **vulnerability**... that is what Jesus meant about being blessed! So we need not expect that it will always be easy for us. If we are chosen and called, and given a new name by Jesus, what goes with the name is really that of a servant, a minister...someone who gives him or herself away and in doing so becomes a gift to the world in the name of Christ. (refer to our Visioning process end sectionJ

Church of the Ascension:

This is my Church....

It is composed of people like me- we make it what it is.

It will be friendly if I am. Its pews will be filled if I help to fill them.

It will do great work if I work.

It will bring other people into worship and fellowship if I bring them.

Therefore, with the help of God, I shall dedicate myself to the task of being all the things that I want my church to be.

The question Jesus asks each of us today is: 'Who do you say that I am?' Are we able to answer honestly and live in the response that we make? Our own spiritual future, yours and mine, and the future of this church here in Hilton may well depend on how we respond. **Amen**