

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity. Proper 16

Collect

Almighty God,
who sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and light of your Church:
open our hearts to the riches of your grace,
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

A reading from the prophecy of Isaiah.

(51.1-6)

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD.
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;
for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.
For the LORD will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples.
I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be for ever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans.

(12. 1-8)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly
than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of
faith that God has assigned.
For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,
so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.
We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;
ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

(16. 13-20)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples,
'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Reflection.

What's in a name?

From our early years they become a part of us – we introduce ourselves as 'I'm Veronica'.

When making a formal presentation we are taught to begin by saying, 'My name is Veronica Beaumont and...' Our names may give clues to our culture, religion or family history.

And what about nicknames? Some of these are teasing like being called Tiny when you are not. Some may be cruel. Others are descriptive or come from the efforts of children to pronounce names. Some are just abbreviations but often they fit their owners better than their given names.

Several of Jesus' disciples have nicknames. Think of James and John, called "the sons of thunder" – we can think of all kinds of possible reasons for that nickname! Matthew is described as "Matthew the tax collector", which may just be reminding us of what he used to do for a living. But it may also say something about his character and his role among the disciples.

In today's Gospel reading, we see Jesus giving Simon a nickname. He is to be Peter, the rock. No doubt the other disciples greeted this new title with ribald laughter, and a lot of leg-pulling. What they know of Peter is far from rock-like. They know him as the one who speaks first and thinks later, as the one who can be relied upon to put his foot in it. The Peter they know shows nothing of the stillness and the unshakeable reliability that the name "Rock" might suggest.

Indeed, almost as soon as Jesus has given Peter his new name, Peter is in trouble. He takes it upon himself to try to teach Jesus his job. (see the next few verses of Matthew's gospel – the start of next Sunday's reading) Peter is clearly rather proud of himself for being brave enough to name Jesus as the Messiah, and he must have been immensely relieved when Jesus accepted the title and commended Peter, the rock, for his insight. But that moment of triumph seems to have gone to his head. He now seems to feel that he is the expert on Jesus' vocation. Jesus keeps going on about suffering, so Peter takes him on one side to explain what the Messiah does and doesn't do.

And suddenly, Peter is another kind of rock, the kind you trip over in the middle of the road on a dark night!

Peter's nickname lasted a long time. Paul calls him Cephas, the rock, with almost exactly the same mixture of admiration and exasperation that we hear in Jesus' voice in today's Gospel. Paul, too, saw Peter as both bedrock and stumbling block.

But, in the long run, this nickname has come to seem utterly appropriate. Jesus was both teasing and prophesying when he said that Peter was the rock on whom the Church was to be built. Peter has the humility to come back to Jesus after he has betrayed him. He has the

courage to face the risen Jesus, relying on his love and forgiveness. He has the grace to allow the story of Peter the stumbling block to be told all over the world, to Christians coming to faith in Christ. Faithfully, Peter followed Jesus for the rest of his life, and to the death that he had tried to persuade Jesus should be avoided. Peter earned his nickname.

The Church has all the same characteristics as Peter, the rock on whom we are founded. We, too, are a strange mixture of the kind of rock you can rely on and the kind of rock that will trip you up. We, too, need to be prepared to tell the stories of our failures, and of the loving Saviour who forgives us and goes on trusting us and building on us. We, too, need to recognise that perfection is not a necessary prerequisite for a disciple of Jesus.

Peter is not the rock on whom the Church is built because he always got the right answer, or made the right choice, or understood what God was doing. We know from the Gospels that Peter did none of those things. Instead, he is the rock because that's what Jesus called him to be, with love and humour. To be worthy successors of Peter, that's all we have to sign up for: to be prepared to let Jesus call us by name. However many times we get it wrong, if Jesus calls our name and we respond, we are the rocks on whom the Church can be built.

*I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.
I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.*