

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity 2020 (23.08.20)

Isaiah 51: 1 – 6; Matthew 16: 13 – 20

So, Marathon Bars became . . . Snickers; Jif (the bathroom surface cleaner) became . . . Cif; April Fruits became . . . Starburst; and in today's Gospel reading, the disciple Simon became . . . Peter. The difference is that for Simon it wasn't just a case of re-branding. Simon's name was changed by Jesus to Peter at a pivotal time in his relationship with Jesus, which is recorded at a pivotal point in St. Matthew's Gospel.

The change of name comes just over half way through St. Matthew's Gospel, when the emphasis shifts *from* Jesus being an itinerant preacher, teacher and healer, interacting with the crowds, *to* Jesus being concerned about his disciples' spiritual formation in readiness for his Passion: his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. And it comes at the point in Simon's relationship with Jesus when he is identified as the rock on which the church is to be built. And with that identification comes the

authority to hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and to bind and loose, or to make rulings which will have divine ratification.

Now, there are all sorts of blind alleys that this could send us down! One scholar has said "More has been written on Matthew 16 verse 18 than on any text in the Bible"¹, which may seem a bit extravagant, but another one says "The assurance given to Peter here has . . . been a most controversial item in the Gospel of Matthew."² It opens up controversy about how the Roman Catholic Church has arrogated Papal authority to the Bishop of Rome. It opens up discussion about the apostolic succession and priestly authority. We reflected a bit upon that less than a couple of months ago at Petertide; and we may well do so again as Maxine is ordained Priest in a few weeks' time – that's going to be, by the way on Friday 16th October, here in the Priory, but with a strict cap of 30 people allowed in

¹ Hauerwas, Matthew, Brazos Theological Commentary [2015]

² Byrne, Lifting the Burden [2004] Liturgical Press

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the building including the official party, so there will be just 10 tickets available to the Priory congregation by ballot, but more about that anon.

So, we're not going to get bogged down in those issues today. Instead we're going to take a more sideways look at the passage. The first thing to point out is that Jesus acknowledged that there will be such a thing as the Church. It's worth just noting that, because sometimes, when we're feeling exasperated with the institution of the church – or the institutionalism of the institution of the church – we say that Jesus never founded a church: he simply preached the Kingdom of God and the church which grew out of that is the product of human hubris. Of course at other times we talk about the church being Christ's bride, or the expression of his body on earth. It depends where on the ecclesiastical spectrum we stand or sometimes which side of the bed we happen to have got out of. But when we're being cynical we say that Jesus never founded a church.

This passage reminds us that there is a tradition attributed to Jesus himself that anticipates there being a church. Of course, the words that *are* attributed to Jesus must not be taken as a verbatim record of what he actually said: they were committed to writing decades after he lived; and they are exclusive to Matthew's tradition of the Gospel. But they are there, and they are Scripture, and they tell us that there will be a church. And they tell us that it is a necessary and inevitable characteristic of that church that it will be involved in conflict. It will not be insipid. It will stand out over and against the World.

Now, those who know me will know that I could only ever be described as a world-affirming Christian. I would never be so hypocritical as to denounce worldly pleasures! There's a joke that the fact God made beer shows that he wants us to be happy! It's not the most profound theological point I've ever made, but I wouldn't dismiss it too quickly. But, however world-affirming our disposition may be, there can be no

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doubt that part of the church's calling is to stand up against abuse, injustice and mean-spiritedness.

That means that it is part of our calling to speak out against the sleazy cronyism that is corrupting our national life: government contracts being awarded, without proper tendering processes, to shell companies set up by people with government connections and no expertise in the field to which the contracts relate. It means it is part of our calling to offer compassion and mercy to people crossing the Channel in unseaworthy dinghies to seek asylum here. It certainly means that we should not shy away from controversy with people commenting on the Daily Mail online article rejoicing that that 16 year old lad died this week trying to cross the Channel.

Simon Peter became sufficiently secure and rock-like to have the authority of the church conferred upon him at the point in his relationship with Jesus when he had developed the insight to bear witness to Jesus

being the Messiah. This is ground-breaking revelation. We've got to chapter 16 in Matthew, but we've not had Jesus identified as Messiah before. This is a seminal moment in Simon Peter's formation. And it's *because* he bears witness to Jesus being the Messiah that he can faithfully and authoritatively found the church.

So, if we are reading this passage allegorically, as we have been, it means that we can only faithfully and authoritatively be church when we are bearing witness to Jesus being the Messiah. How do we do that? We align ourselves with what he proclaimed his mission to be. He proclaimed his mission to be bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. He said that whenever we fed the hungry, clothed the naked and honoured the dignity of people whose liberty has been denied them, we are doing it for him.

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Four weeks ago I spoke of how adjusting to live in the medium term with the threat of coronavirus makes us acknowledge that we are a broken church. This week we have felt some of the impact of that brokenness. We have studied the regulations for opening village and community halls, and we have had to conclude that we cannot open the Priory Church Rooms at any time in the foreseeable future.

For 34 years (is it?) we've provided a hot meal for elderly folk in our community in those Rooms. I cannot say when we shall be able to do so again. This week I have had to turn down two requests from the Hinge Centre to use the Rooms; two projects designed to promote the well-being and self-respect and skills of some of the most vulnerable people in the most deprived part of our parish. If ever there were an example of mission being a question of looking for what god is up to and then going and joining in, then our support of the Hinge Centre is it. And I've turned

them away. I've rejected their request for support. It's heart-breaking.

Now, I point this out *not* to distance myself from the decision. I was a party to the decision which we had to make for reasons that are entirely beyond our control. I do not point this out in order to reproach ourselves. We mustn't do so. I point it out in order to encourage us, in order to exhort us to cling on to the vision and to be sustained in our commitment to bear witness to Jesus as our Messiah so that we can once again be a faithful, authoritative and securely founded expression of Christ's church as soon as it is possible.

Peter blundered at the Transfiguration *after* this seminal moment. I know we read the story two weeks ago, but in the narrative of the Gospel it comes afterwards. Peter went on to deny and betray Jesus. And Peter went on still to be faithful to his calling and to be that rock on which the church was built. We too, if we keep faith, will live up to our calling. Amen.