

On This Faith I Will Build My Church

23 August 2020

Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

I often record programmes from the History Channel to watch later. Last Monday I watched one I had recorded last Christmas. It was about St Peter. It followed the archaeological evidence that bones found in the crypt of St Peter's Basilica in Rome might actually be the bones of St Peter referred to in today's Gospel. It was really fascinating stuff. They quoted today's Gospel about three times, especially verse 18, "You are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church." So, are the bones of St Peter buried underneath the Vatican? Spoiler alert. They don't know and it just doesn't matter. Jesus isn't saying my church is built literally on St Peter, but on the faith of St Peter. His faith, not his bones are what are important.

In our Gospel Jesus is continuing his zig-zag movement around Galilee today we find him in Caesarea Philippi in the far north. Jesus conducts an opinion poll. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks. Everyone agrees that he is ministering God's message. But Peter takes it to the next level. And then there is the verse that many Anglicans live by. He sternly told them not to tell anyone he was the Messiah.

But what is faith anyway? How did Peter have it, and how do I get it?

As part of a doctoral thesis a university student spent a year with a group of Navajo Indians on a Reserve. As he did his research, he lived with one family, sleeping in their hut, eating their food, working with them, and living the life of a 20th century native American. The old grandmother of the family spoke no English at all, yet a close friendship formed between the two. They spent a great deal of time sharing a friendship that was meaningful to each, yet unexplainable to anyone else. In spite of the language difficulties they shared a common language of love and understood each other. Over the months he learned a few phrases of Navajo and she picked up a little English. When it was time for him to return to the university and write up his PhD the tribe held a going away

celebration. It was marked by sadness since the young man had become close to the village and all would miss him. As he prepared to get into his car and leave, the old grandmother came to tell him goodbye. With tears streaming down her face she placed her hands on either side of his face, looked directly into his eyes, and said, “I like me best when I’m with you.” I like me best when I’m with you.

This is what faith is. We have mistakenly made faith believing a set of things, like the creed. Faith is not a set of beliefs. We have mistakenly made faith a set of rules like the 10 commandments. Faith is not a set of rules. Faith is a relationship with Jesus. Faith is a friendship with God. Faith is a life-giving relationship with the living Jesus. Faith is a friendship with the One who brings out the very best in us.

Peter was given a new name by Jesus. He became the best version of himself in the presence of Jesus. I like me best, Peter could have said, when I’m with you Lord.

Isn’t that the way we feel in the presence of Jesus? He brings out the best in us.

In his presence we begin to see ourselves as worthy and valuable. The hurts, the cares, the disappointments of our lives are behind us when we look into his eyes and realize the depth of his love for us. Our sense of worth no longer depends on what we do. Look at how many times Peter dropped the ball.

But how do we grow our faith?

Faith is simply growing our friendship with Jesus.

I’m not very qualified to tell you how to grow friendship, I only need to hire a phone booth to gather all my friends. But growing a friendship relationship with God is no different from other friends.

To grow friendship, we need to spend time with the other person. We need to communicate with the other person and the more honest and open we are the better. We might start with lots of words, but sometimes companionable silence does the depth of love most justice.

At this time of heightened COVID anxiety in our community we need a friend who can get us through. Faith comes from the Latin word that means trust. Trust grows when we break bread, when we talk, when we have friends in common. Our relationship with Jesus grows around the communion table, when we pray and when we gather with the other friends of Jesus.

It's interesting to watch TV programmes about an old bloke's bones, but real faith is built in the here and now with a risen, present Saviour.

After a large dinner at one of Hollywood's huge mansions a famous actor was entertaining the guests with stunning recitations of Shakespeare. Then, as an encore he asked if anyone had any requests. A shy vicar put up her hand. And asked if he knew Psalm 23. "Yes, I do" said the actor, but I will give it on one condition, that when I am finished you recite the very same psalm.

The priest was more than a little embarrassed, but she reluctantly agreed. The actor did a beautiful rendition, The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.. the guests applauded loudly and then it was the priest's turn. She got up and said the same words but this time there was no applause, just a hushed silence ... and the beginnings of tears.

The actor knew how to work crowd and savoured the silence. Then he said "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you realise what has happened here tonight. I know the words, but this priest knows the Shepherd ... and that my friends, makes all the difference."