

“...on this rock I will build my church”

A sermon prepared by Revd Charles Draper for St Peter's Patronal Festival 2021

Ref: Matthew 16, 13-19

We have missed you.

There are things we haven't missed, like the Wolvercote roundabout and the trains rushing by at 5am!

But we have missed you – missed our chats, our coffee times, our conversations, and all our mutual support.

I don't say this to feel sorry for ourselves - we don't. I am saying it because it has made me realise what a special community this church family is. The level of friendship, love, caring, encouragement and support here is lovely – and I think it is something you should rejoice in, and continue to cherish and nurture in the coming days.

But of course this is something that we have all been missing, during all these lockdowns. Haven't we had a strange time! 16 months on and it's not over yet.

It's been a strange time to move to a new place. Of course it's given us the time we've needed to settle into the house and garden. That itself is not all done yet. We are still awaiting our St Peter's patio! Though we have been able to use part of your generous gift to us to buy five new raised beds for our vegetables, salad and herbs.

Otherwise we have mainly been supporting each other in our family through the pandemic, through degree courses interrupted and going online, a much postponed Wedding, and for Jane a very challenging year as a teacher.

For me by contrast it has been an enforced Sabbatical. And actually that has been exactly what I have needed. On Easter morning - a time when in the past I have usually been ready for a break after the busyness of Lent and Holy Week – this year it was the other way round, and on Easter Day I suddenly felt ready to start again. A couple of possible areas of ministry are opening up, and I am looking forward to a new start in September.

As you are as well. I am guessing that the combination of all these lockdowns `with a vacancy has been quite hard. But a new Vicar starting in September sounds very good timing indeed.

So times of change for us all. And Jesus, in our Gospel reading today, is preparing his disciples for massive times of change. In particular he is preparing Peter for his new role. But it is not just Peter – it is also the twelve, who will share this task with him.

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

The church is only mentioned twice in the four gospels – both times in Matthew. This has led some people to doubt whether Jesus could have spoken these words.

But what we need to remember is that the word church here doesn't carry any of the associations we have with the word – buildings, liturgy and rituals, hierarchy – none of those things are in mind here. The word here means community, or assembly – a community that gathers together.

And although Jesus normally speaks of the kingdom of God rather than the church, the fact remains that he spent a huge amount of his time training up the twelve. In effect therefore he was founding a community, setting up a new community founded on these twelve apostles.

This I believe is what our gospel passage today is about – Jesus founding his new community, and commissioning Peter to be its leader.

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

But before we go on to focus on Peter the rock, let’s note first who is the subject of this sentence – who is it that will actually be doing the building? And the very clear answer Jesus gives is that he will do it himself. It is Jesus, the crucified and risen Jesus, who by his Spirit will be building the church.

I find that hugely reassuring. It is not our job – we are fellow workers, working with Jesus. He is the one who will be in charge. Yet it is also quite sobering. This is the Jesus who went through the Cross on the way to resurrection. And he is quite clear in his teaching that the growth of his church will involve suffering and sorrow as well as joy, times of weakness as well as times of strength. And maybe in a way that too is reassuring, because it feels realistic. And remember, both as a church and as individuals, it is in our times of weakness that we learn the most.

So be assured, Jesus, the builder of the church, is always there with us, and whenever we turn to him, he will guide us and will show us the way.

But he works in partnership with us. So the church needs leaders. And clearly here Jesus chooses Peter to be the first leader in the church’s early days.

But why choose Peter? We laugh at Peter, and all the mistakes he made. This is the man who always rushed in where angels fear to tread. The man who would open his mouth first and engage his brain after. The man who acted first and thought about the consequences later. Why choose him?

Maybe because Jesus knew that was exactly what was needed, to lead the early church through challenging and tumultuous times. Not a cautious man who would carefully think everything through – but a risk taker.

A risk taker – that is what St Peter was – and that is what this tiny precarious community needed to launch it into the huge and powerful Roman Empire. And if you read the early chapters of Acts of the Apostles - what a dynamic leader he turned out to be.

Now I think our situation as a church in 21st century Britain has some similarities. The pandemic has accelerated social changes that were already taking place. As we emerge into a new post pandemic world, we are facing a situation full of uncertainty, a deeply secular society and a fast changing culture.

It’s potentially actually quite exciting! It’s easy to say that now that I’m retired! But I am sure this is a time more than ever before where we need a risk taking church ready to embrace the way forward with enthusiasm, curiosity and an open and positive approach.

Now here I have to be honest and say that I have never been a great risk taker – I am actually inclined to be risk averse! And I hope for your sakes that your new vicar will be more of a risk taker than me.

But if this makes any of you feel a bit tired, don’t worry! We are not all called to be like St Peter – and we are not all called to be risk takers.

Remember in the gospels Peter is never on his own. It is always Peter with the twelve. Or Peter, James and John. Even in his most personal moments with Jesus by the lakeside after the resurrection, John is there in the background.

In the early chapters of Acts, you find Peter and John working together. And they are a fascinating combination. When you look back to Easter, at the empty tomb, it was John who believed, but Peter who went in and looked. In the boat on the lake it was John who recognised Jesus, but Peter who jumped in the water and swam.

And later when they are working together, it is Peter who speaks and acts, but I think he needs John with him – John the insightful prayerful one. Together they are an amazing combination. And if like me you're inclined to feel a bit tired these days you can still be like John - a quiet encourager.

Which are you – a risk taker, or a quiet encourager? I believe the church needs both.

So as we all go forward in our different directions – and yes this is a farewell today as you start to prepare for the arrival of a new vicar – Jane and I wish you all the very best – all of God's blessings – on your way forward.

And remember – the church is not about buildings – it is about people – a community. So please continue to be the loving caring community that we have known. When I was struggling to continue my ministry through Parkinsons, you were always unfailingly encouraging and affirming. And that is something you are so good at. So I hope that you will encourage and affirm both your new vicar and each other, and that you will continue to love and care for one another as Jesus taught us.

And to those of you who are risk takers, I would say be bold, take risks. And never be disheartened when some experiments fail. And for those of you who are perhaps a bit too tired to take risks these days, your role is just as important – be prayerful encouragers, affirming, encouraging, especially when things don't go well – I believe your role is just as important.

And whenever times are challenging, remember again it is Jesus, not us, who is building his church, and the crucified and risen Jesus is always there beside us, to inspire us, to challenge us, to reassure us, and to show us the way.

Amen