
On this Rock

Simon said to Jesus 'You are the Messiah'. Jesus said to Simon, 'You are the Rock'. This is a story of how we discover who Jesus really is – and how we are never the same again.

I'm going to read this story three times, to look at what it meant 2000 years ago, what it means for our contemporary culture, and finally what it means for you and me on this very day.

Jesus takes his disciples to the northern borderlands, to a place with a significant name. It was called Caesarea Philippi. That's to say the first part of the name was the name of the Roman Emperor, Caesar, sometimes known as the living Son of God, the self-styled saviour, protector and deliverer of his people. The second part is named after Philip, ruler of the region, lapsed Jew and puppet of the hated Romans. You may recall Philip's wife went off with his brother Herod Antipas, the story that led to the death of John the Baptist. So the name Caesarea Philippi represents all that was wrong with the way Palestine was governed in Jesus' time. And the town was also known, and still is by the way, as Banyas, after the Greek god Pan, who had a shrine there. So Jesus is on the border with the Gentiles, the border of Jewish faith and culture; and he's at the heart of the question of where authority lies in Israel.

Jesus turns and asks, 'who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And the disciples talk about John, Elijah, Jeremiah – all of them prophets who proclaimed repentance and judgment. 'But who do *you* say that I am?' says Jesus. You can imagine the silence. Then Peter says 'you are the anointed king Israel has been waiting for for 500 years. You are the very presence of God among us. You are the one who will restore the intimate companionship of God and his people.' And Jesus blesses Peter, and says 'Peter, you didn't discover this for yourself – it was God who gave you the vision to see what you have seen, and say what you have said.'

And Jesus announces that this is the moment, this is the place, and this is the conversation, on which his Church is to rest. You could call this quite a Genesis thing to do. God said to Abram 'I will make you the father of many nations', and promptly changed his name to Abraham, meaning ancestor of many. Later God fought with Jacob all night and then said 'You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed'. In just the same way Jesus marks a new beginning for the people of God by giving a new and descriptive name, Peter, the rock. And the people founded on this rock are to be Jesus' own people, for he calls them *my* Church. And Jesus knows Peter is a willing but impetuous follower, who promises more than he delivers. He knows Peter is on occasion stupid, selfish, scared, and just plain wrong. But he nonetheless founds the Church on him, and promises that the forces of evil and death combined will never be stronger than this fragile rock.

Finally Jesus announces that he will give Peter the keys of God's empire, the swipe card to the universe. He will trust Peter with knowing when to constrain people and when to let them go, when to shape the Church along the contours of human limitations and when to set people free to explore the boundless possibilities of life in the Spirit. And Jesus tells the disciples to keep these secrets to themselves just for now, because they haven't yet grasped that the cost of all this wonder and glory is the cross, and the cross is still way beyond their imaginations.

So that is what this story meant in the first century. Against the backdrop of pagan religion, Roman domination, and Jewish collaboration, Peter names Jesus as the embodiment of God's purposes for his people, and Jesus names Peter as the rock on which the new form of companionship with God will be founded. Peter says 'Israel, God's people, will never be the same again'. Jesus says 'Neither will you, Peter'.

So much for 2000 years ago. What does this story mean for our contemporary culture? Well, let's start with the context. If the Caesar of Caesarea is those forces that dominate our lives while claiming to be our defender, our

saviour, the bringer of peace, the Caesar is all around us. If the Philip of Philippi is those institutions that epitomize the collapse of fine traditions and noble ideals into shoddy compromises and shameless backhanders, then Philippi is sadly no distant nightmare either. And Banyas, the shrine of Pan: surely we can see that we live today in a marketplace of faiths, torn between the credulity and inhumanity of fanaticism and the cynicism and despair of unbelief. We are all on the road to Caesarea Philippi.

In this context people still admire Jesus, whether as a controversial firebrand like John the Baptist or a miracle-working maverick like Elijah or a kill-joy doom-monger like Jeremiah. But the further we get from the messianic expectation of the first century, the bigger Peter's claim about Jesus seems to become. Where Peter would have said 'Jews', we would say 'everyone'. Where Peter might have said 'people' we would say 'all creation'. Where Peter might have said 'world' we would say 'universe'. Where Peter said 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' we might say 'You are the epicenter of the universe, the purpose of creation, the meaning of existence, the bond that joins humanity to God for ever.'

If this is who Jesus is we humans have no scientific or deductive capacity to identify him. Science largely works by mapping repeated phenomena, and Jesus is a one-off. So the evidence of Peter's five senses could not have told him who Jesus was because you can't recognize something if neither you nor anyone else has ever seen it before. This is a recognition that can only come from God: it is revelation.

If this story tells us exactly who Jesus is for us today, then it also tells us what the Church is. The Church is still Peter. That is, the Church is a *fragile people inspired by God to speak the truth about Jesus*. Peter spoke the truth about Jesus; so does the Church. But Peter was not infallible. Neither is the Church. If Peter spoke the truth, it was because God inspired his words; so it is for the Church. Peter was sometimes stupid, selfish, scared, and just plain wrong; so is the Church. But Jesus chose Peter. And Jesus still chooses the Church. Who are we to differ?

Fallible and clumsy it may sometimes be, but the Church will never be overcome by death or evil. So long as it continues to live as a fragile people inspired by God to speak the truth about Jesus, the Church will never be extinguished by evil or death. The best baseball or basketball matches leave the spectators on the edge of their seats till the last nail-biting minute, with the result in the balance. But reality isn't a baseball or basketball cliffhanger. We already know the result. God wins. The gates of Hades may look pretty dangerous, and they may hurt like hell, but they don't win. That's the gospel.

Meanwhile Peter gets to bind and loose. Many of the controversies in the Church today come down to binding and loosing. One bunch of people say the Church is doing too much binding, and is commanding people to live a certain way when they can't see how they can or can't see why they should. Another bunch of people are saying the Church is doing too much loosing, and it's about time people were told they had to be bound to certain patterns or expectations of life. What both sides need to remember is that the point of binding is to set people free to live disciplined and therefore flourishing lives; while the point of loosing is to bind people more closely to the free Spirit of God. Discipline is for freedom; and freedom is for God.

So this is what the story means for contemporary culture. In a free market of religious choice, where all the options seem shop soiled, God gives the Church the vision to see Jesus: and in Jesus to discover the truth that shapes all other truth. Meanwhile Jesus really did intend the Church: and its many failings, individual and corporate, are no surprise to him. The miracle of grace is not just that God wins, but that he chooses such fallible creatures as us to be the location of his victory. He trusts his Church with mighty responsibilities, and very occasionally it rises to the challenge.

That's the story of Caesarea Philippi in the first century and the twenty-first. But what about today? I mean now. I mean a stranger standing in your pulpit as your new Dean. I think several parts of this story speak to our very situation this morning.

Duke Chapel, like Caesarea Philippi, is both on the border and at the centre. It is at the centre of power in many ways. The gothic architecture is telling us that education has the power over the imagination today that the Church had in the middle ages. The prominence of business, medicine, political science and law tell us that a good education at Duke is a passport to the corridors of power thereafter. In the middle ages the Church was powerful because it had the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Today education is powerful because it has the password to the Nasdaq 500. Yet Duke Chapel is also on the borderlands. It is close to boundary between faith and non-faith; and it is in the free market of religious choice, where one day binding is in fashion, and the next day everyone's for loosing. At the heart of the issues, yet at the frontiers of faith: this is Caesarea Philippi, the kind of place where people discover who Jesus really is.

And Duke Chapel has a great tradition of visiting preachers. We get to hear all sorts of people and find out who they think the Son of Man is. Some say John the Baptist, some say Mother Teresa, and others say Elvis. But the real question is 'Who do *you* say he is?' My job is to commend to you Peter's answer to that question, and to remind you that following Jesus means being his Church.

Today I feel like Peter. Like Peter, I was more than a little surprised to be chosen for this job. Like Peter, I'm not infallible. Like Peter I'm sometimes stupid, selfish, scared, and just plain wrong. Like Peter I know what it means to hurt and fail the people who most love me, and to seek in my forgetting what can only be found in God's forgiving. But like Peter, it's not about my choosing, it's about Christ's commissioning. Like Peter, it's not about my researching, it's about Christ's revealing. Jesus had a job for Peter to do. And so, it seems, he has for me. And that job is to be, like Peter, a person inspired by God to speak the truth about Jesus.

So here we are together this morning, in the centre of what seems like power, and yet on the frontiers of faith – in just the kind of place where disciples discover who Jesus really is. Here we are together with another new beginning, not for the whole people of God but for one small part of it. Am I the kind of rock on which Jesus might found his Church? Are we? Whatever our anxieties about our own worthiness, whatever our doubts about the holiness of the Church, whatever our history and whatever our frailty, we are called to be, like Peter, a fragile people inspired by God to speak the truth about Jesus.

Duke has a famous congregation. My prayer is that as we grow together in faith and hope and love, we will become known most of all for this one thing: that we are a fragile people inspired by God to speak the truth about Jesus. And this famous chapel in which we worship this morning will be known far and wide as a place where, loudly or quietly, in sweet song or wordless gesture, in regular attendance or occasional pilgrimage, people are inspired by God to speak the truth about Jesus. For what Peter discovered near Caesarea Philippi that long-ago day is just as true this very day: the truth for which we long is, in the end, about Jesus. Long may we speak that truth together, and long may he build his Church on such fragile creatures as us.