

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 23rd August 2020

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

You'll have heard this one before, but it strikes a chord and it's worth repeating. Picture the scene. It's Sunday morning and a couple are still at home. The guy says: 'I don't want to go to church today. I just don't feel like it. Can we skip it?' His other half says, certainly not. Don't argue; we've got to go. Three reasons. 1: We always go. 2: Everyone expects us there. 3: You're the minister. They need to hear your sermon...

Well, I promise that's not a cry from the heart. But it does reflect that a lot of people, whether they go to church or not, can have mixed feelings about it all. They may say: I'm spiritual, but not religious. Or, I've got my own faith but I'm not into organised religion, or Christianity. Look at the harm it can do, they may sometimes say.

And ok, there's a fair point there and certainly something you can have a conversation about. Jesus saw the bad side of organised religion too, and he wasn't shy about saying so. 'Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, you hypocrites!' That's later in Matthew, we might get to it as Trinity rolls on. It's a long season.

But Jesus does believe in the church. He founds it. In doing so, he says that he's giving his disciples the keys of the kingdom; it's like a portal into heaven. 'You are Peter', he says to the disciple whose given name is Simon, 'And on this rock I will build my church.' It's a pun, of course: Petros in Greek means rock and, as we know, Peter was quite a wobbly kind of rock. But then, aren't we all, all of us who make up Christ's body, the church.

But why that name, Petros? It's not just a fun play on words. There's a link back to our reading from Isaiah 51, which Matthew must have intended, and which I'd honestly never noticed until these two readings came up together. Abram, too, is significantly renamed: he becomes Abraham, father of many, ancestor of all God's people. And here in Isaiah, Abraham is described as the 'rock' from which are hewn all those who seek the Lord. So, if Peter is a rock, it means that he too is a foundation for everyone who seeks God in Christ, through the church of Christ. Same kind of name change; same kind of meaning. Same kind of rock.

So what does it mean to us to be the church? What does it matter to us? What's it for?

We know all the things that can be wrong with church. It can be inward-looking and petty and squabbling and divisive, and it can care more about form and ritual and how things are done than about the spirit. All the things that wound Jesus up about Judaism in his time, and that St Paul wrote endless letters to the new Christian churches about. Issues that have never really gone away, and perhaps won't,

because they are to do with what we are like. But what's the good, the important side of being church?

The American theologian and writer on Christian ethics Stanley Hauerwas is really good about this. He's an interesting guy: he trained as a bricklayer when he was young – it was his dad's trade – and he has described doing theology as like laying one brick at a time, so that it all fits. He is convinced that our main job as Christians today – even more than working and arguing for social justice and kindness and compassion and neighbourliness and all those important things - our main job is to be church.

Why? Because that builds us into something bigger and wiser and richer than just ourselves and, from it, everything else follows. It means that we become part of a story that we didn't choose: God's story. We don't get to make God: God gets to make us.

And it's where the church community comes in. A community, as he puts it, 'that knows its life depends on the faithful remembering of God's care in his creation through the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus.' A community that lives out its conviction through prayer and worship and devotion to God's word and through mutual love. So that everyone can see what that looks like. It's why Christians need the church. Hauerwas says:

'I don't have any faith in myself of living a virtuous life; but if I am surrounded by other people who are also formed by the same commitments, then we've got a better chance. We need one another to live up to the wonderful invitation we've been given to be other than we are.'

And we do all of that, not for our own sake, but for God and the service of God's world and all God's people. But it starts by being church.

This church, St Michael's, with its current round of fundraising and building works, is looking to its own future. So what will being church, in and for this community, this place, look like for us? What will we do, as a church, with the keys of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus hands to us?