

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs – Sermon for Trinity 3 OR St Peter’s Day

Gospel Reading - Matthew 10: 40-42 OR Matthew 16: 13-19

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is very good to be with you and to share in your worship today. I am writing this sermon the day after the Prime Minister announced that churches may reopen for public worship from 4th July – but before we know exactly what that will mean. By the time this reaches you, the advice may have changed (and hopefully will have been clarified at least), so please bear with me if I do not try to offer a commentary on what is happening!

I am also conscious that a good many of our churches may have chosen to celebrate the Feast of St Peter this weekend – especially those which are dedicated to Saint Peter – and I am therefore giving you a *choice* today, in terms of the Gospel reading you may have heard, as I will refer to both the Gospel for Saint Peter (from Matthew 16) and to the Gospel appointed for Trinity 3 (which comes from Matthew 10). You may choose!

Petertide is (or should be) of course the season of ordinations, and in our diocese (and indeed across our nation) there are people who will be feeling disappointed that it has not been possible to ordain them to either the Diaconate or the Priesthood at this time. In our diocese, we are hoping very much to ordain both our new Deacons and Priests at the start of October – circumstances permitting! Please do pray for those concerned, and for their families, as this will I am sure be a time of disappointment and uncertainty for them. It is not after all what they were expecting!

On the other hand, this unexpected turn of events does give us an opportunity to reflect on what really matters, for us as people and for the life of the Church.

And the first thing I want to highlight concerns Saint Peter’s confession of Christ in Matthew 16. Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”. And Peter alone replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” This is a crucial turning point in Peter’s life and in the life of the Church. *Peter is the first person to recognise who Jesus is.* Not fully, not perfectly (in fact he gets it all very wrong a few moments later), but nevertheless Peter is the first to grasp the revelation of who Jesus is – “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Without that confession, the Church could never have been born. It was in a very real sense the moment of the Church being conceived, as the community of the followers of Jesus Christ. That reality may have burst into life on the Day of Pentecost, but this was the moment at which the seed germinated. Without this revelation to Peter, the Church would never have been born, let alone got off the ground. Peter’s confession of Christ made him the foundation stone of the Church, just as Jesus said, and in each and every generation, the renewal of that confession – *the recognition by the people of God of who Jesus really is* – becomes the foundation stone of the Church. The acknowledgement, the confession, of who Jesus is crucial for the life of the Church – because otherwise we can drift into being just another religious or social organisation; and the starting point for the life of the Church must and should be our confession, our conviction, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

And the second thing that follows from this is Jesus’ response to Peter: “*Blessed are you, Simon son of John. My Father in heaven has revealed this to you. And so now, I will make you the rock on which I will build my church.*” At this point, Jesus signals that he will *pass on* his ministry to Peter, and with him the other disciples, as the foundation stone of the Church he is building. Peter and the apostles,

and through them we ourselves, are part of God's plan. Here Jesus is *beginning* to hand on his ministry to Peter and the disciples. And that has continued down the centuries through the life of the Church – within which those who are ordained have a particular, though not exclusive, ministry.

Peter says in his First Letter that all Christians together are part of a royal priesthood, a holy nation, belonging to God. That is our privilege, going right back to the calling and commissioning of the first disciples. But, in the Anglican tradition and in many others besides, there is also a particular and special calling for those who are to be ordained as Priests in the Church of God. And at this season of Petertide, it is right that we should pause to reflect on that special calling, and to pray for those who are ordained to that ministry, or who (God willing) will be ordained to that ministry in a few months' time! *They and we are part of God's plan* to build his Church, and God's promise is that no form of opposition – not the gates of hell or the coronavirus pandemic – will ultimately be able to stand in the way of God's purposes.

And that brings us to the third thing I want to highlight, which comes from the Gospel for Trinity 3, in Matthew 10. This is the very end of Jesus' commissioning the apostles as he sends them out to preach the gospel and to heal the sick. This is the chapter many of us have been looking at over the last three weeks in our Sunday services. Here Jesus sends them out, and says to them, "*whoever receives you, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me.*" And in the economy of the gospel, it is the care and concern that the apostles receive from those they meet that *enables* their mission to the world. Those who receive them and their message become in turn members of the household of faith – which at Pentecost becomes the Church.

Without that kind of care for those who minister in Christ's name, the ministry of the gospel is seriously hindered. And therefore each and every one of us has a role to play in supporting those who minister to us, in order that that ministry can flourish and grow. So at this season of Petertide, may I encourage you please to reflect on the ministry that is offered by those who are ordained, and ask you to think afresh how you can support and encourage them in that ministry? They minister to the whole people of God, so that the whole people of God can minister to the world that Christ came to save. These are Jesus' words at this season of Petertide to those who are called to ordained ministry – and they are also words to each one of us: "*whoever receives you, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me.*"

So three themes for all of us this Petertide: Firstly, Peter's confession of Christ – his recognition that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God – that faith which is the foundation of the life of the Church. Secondly, the particular and special role which is played by those called to the ordained ministry – a role which is not for their own sakes, but which is for the sake of the whole people of God, the royal priesthood of all believers. And thirdly, the role which we can all play, to help support and sustain the ministry of those who are ordained, so that they in turn can help support and sustain us in our own lives and ministries in the world.

So may God bless you richly as together you serve him in the Church and in the world, today and always. Amen.