

28th June 2020: St. Peter, Acts 12:1-7, Matt 16:13-19 – ‘Lead Me To The Rock’

St. Peter is one of the greatest and most likeable characters in the Bible. We love Peter because he's so *normal*. Enthusiastic, spontaneous, likely to say the first thing that comes into his head, and just as likely to mess up too. The fact that Jesus chose a chap who denied him and ran away at the crucial moment to be the one who would lead the church, speaks volumes for the unconditional love of our Saviour, and the fact that He sees beyond our failings, to the people that we can truly be. Peter tells us that there are *always* second chances with God, and that gives us hope.

The church celebrates St Peter officially tomorrow, and this is the week – in the Church of England at least – when new ministers are ordained: usually this weekend or next. Next Saturday will be the 10th anniversary of my ordination, so it's a special week for me, though I must admit to as much relief as joy to know that, somehow or other, I've made it this far!

Our bible passages today show Peter at his best, don't they. There's his extraordinary escape from prison, as recounted in Acts chapter 12, and it's been wonderful to remind ourselves in this service that Jesus is still freeing captives today. It doesn't matter if the chains are physical, emotional or spiritual, **Jesus is the one who sets us free**.

I knew Finny personally soon after he came out of prison, he was in our study group at church, and I still have a book he bought me as he and his wife moved on to pastures new. 'My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee' is a joyous cry that many of us still claim for ourselves.

But today we also travel back to the moment when Jesus commissions Peter to lead his church. The town of Caesarea Philippi where it happened is built on a huge rock, so it's easy to imagine, when Jesus speaks to Peter, that he points down to where they are standing, or stamps on it with his foot to show Peter just how strong God is able to make him. 'On *this* rock I will build my church.'

Let's note a couple of things in this lovely encounter. First, **the clue is in the name**. Peter literally means 'Rock', and the image is so memorable that it's easy to forget that Peter's original name is Simon. The word Simon is similar to the Hebrew word for 'reed'. So when Jesus commissions Peter, what he's effectively saying is: 'You're no longer "Reedy", you're "Rocky".'

But unlike Sylvester Stallone, or indeed the film star Dwayne Johnson – who is known as 'The Rock' – Simon's new nickname wasn't due to his physical prowess. It was a spiritual calling, a spiritual empowering. Way back in the Psalms King David refers to God as His Rock, and in one of his most memorable lines, declares: 'Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.' Peter's 'rock-ness' is ultimately built on *the* Rock, the 'Rock of Ages', as the hymn puts it: God himself.

This is The Rock on which we stand. The Rock that smashes the chains which bind us. The Rock that holds us fast in the storm. The Rock that is higher and stronger than each of us.

And when Jesus takes Peter and his friends to the great rock at Caesarea Philippi he is openly hinting at his true identity, and waiting to see if his disciples have worked it out yet. **'Who do you say I am?'** This is perhaps the greatest and most important question in all of history, and one which each one of us ultimately has to answer for ourselves. We can watch Jesus, and listen to him, and admire his great power, and marvel at his great love. But in the end, Jesus always asks us a direct question: Who do you say I am?

Am I just a great teacher, a good role model, even a prophet? Or am I something more? The chosen one of God, the Rock of human history, the Alpha and the Omega, the One you can trust, and on whom you can base your whole life? Who do you say I am?

Like Peter, Jesus invites us to admit his true identity and to trust in Him. To build our lives not just on the rock of the church, but on the greater rock that holds it fast: Christ himself.

'Rock of Ages, cleft for me: let me hide myself in Thee.' 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Lord Jesus come into my life today, and let me stand on your Rock. Amen.

As we let these words sink deep, we'll play the lovely old hymn 'Rock of Ages', which speaks of the great Rock who allows himself to be broken for us, that we might be made whole, that we might be free. Let's pray, or sing, and be led back to that Rock...