

Church Visions – Matthew 16.13-20 Romans 12: 1-8
Sermon for Sunday 27 August 2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)

The other week we held our parish vision day, when many of us came together to share all sorts of hopes and dreams, ideas and aspirations, for how we might take our churches forward into the coming years. There was good conversation and lots of energy in the room, whilst we recognised concerns and difficulties about the times we find ourselves in. It's now right we take a bit of time for reflection, and part of that reflection needs to be going back to source, looking to the Bible for a vision of what church is and should be. Each of today's two readings provide at least one image to help us maintain a true vision of the church.

Let's start with St Paul in Romans. Paul uses one of his favourite verbal pictures to visualise the church as a single body – the body of Christ on earth. Just as a human body is made up of many limbs and organs, so is the church comprises many body-parts, or members. Each one is different. Each one is vital. All are interdependent, needing one another to function properly. Everyone contributes in a different way to the whole. No one does everything. No one has nothing to do. This means that when we think of the church, we shouldn't do so as we might other organisations: it is not divided between providers and consumers; between employers and employees, or between paid staff and volunteers; between carers and cared for; between sellers and buyers. We are one in Christ, and we need one another.

The church can only function on this model as all these active interdependent members make their own commitment to Christ and his church. Paul uses very strong language to describe that commitment. He talks of sacrifice. Christians are to live their lives sacrificially because of the sacrifice Christ has made for us: Paul has just spent eleven chapters of Romans outlining what this means. The letter turns now on massive '*therefore*': 'Therefore, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual act of worship.' In the ancient world, sacrifice was literal. I've often thought the streets of ancient cities would have been filled with the stench of animal blood and burnt flesh from sacrifices on altars to various gods. By contrast, and knowing Christ has literally sacrificed himself for us, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, giving ourselves over wholeheartedly to God.

Paul says, offer your body: it reminds us this is not just about the things we think of as spiritual but our whole lives – it's how we work as well as how we pray; it's how we serve others as well as how we sing hymns; it's Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. Church – the body of Christ – does not only exist when we are together but when we're apart. We 'do church' when we're at home or in the office or on the bus, every bit as much as when we are in the church building. As we take on attitudes like these, it will lead to the renewing of our minds: no longer weighed down by the concerns and agendas of all around us, we are opened up by the shared possibilities of faith and hope in the Lord Jesus. That is a vision of church as body.

The second picture comes from the Gospel, and it is of church as a building, but focussing on the question, what are you building on? What is the foundation stone? Both our church buildings have foundation stones giving their date of when construction began, but the foundation of the true church way back before!

The question Jesus asked the disciples at Caesarea Philippi must have been disconcerting: 'Who do you say I am?' Well, we know your name, Jesus! But who was Jesus, *really*? That's what everyone must have been asking. The people knew him as a rabbi whose teachings resonated as no other, and those teachings were backed up with signs and miracles. The disciples knew him as *their* rabbi who had chosen and called them, led them and taught them, and opened their eyes to things beyond their understanding. Of course people were asking, who is this, really? When Jesus turned and asked them, most could only stumble over names from the past – another Jeremiah, or Elijah, or John the Baptist. But Peter just blurts it out – no fear of embarrassment that he might have got it wrong! You are the Christ, the Son of God: the one long-foretold in the Scriptures; the one who would restore Israel, judge the nations and bring in God's kingdom.

In response, Jesus gives him a new name that means Rock, and adds, 'on this rock I will build my church.' It's not so much the person, Peter, on whom Jesus will build. That would be too much for anyone. It's on the rock-solid belief in Jesus Christ, Son of God. It's on this belief alone that the church is built, yesterday, today and always. When Peter spoke these words at Caesarea Philippi, they were an eye-popping moment of revelation – given by God, not worked out by a disciple. Today, it doesn't necessarily have the same impact. This is old news for us. We've heard it before. Each Sunday we say together one or other version of the Creed, affirming that faith. I suspect it's a part of the service that many of us find hard to get enthusiastic about. But it's there to centre us, to bring us back to the foundations of faith in Jesus Christ, along with Father and Holy Spirit. Some versions of the Creed begin 'I believe' and others 'We believe.' The church is made up of believers, but individually, our strength of belief may fluctuate – times we are less than rock-solid than others. But together we stand firm on the rock. These are our foundations.

Equally, if you were to declare in the streets or to your friends, 'I know who Jesus is: he is Christ, the Son of God!' people are unlikely to be impressed. Whether or not they understand it, they've heard it before. It can be tempting, in our efforts to connect with others or to serve others, to say what we believe doesn't matter. We need to connect, we need to serve, we need to have open doors and soft edges, but if the church loses its foundations, it will only crumble away.

Two visions of church – don't lose them: church as a body, interconnected, interdependent, valuing, caring, supporting, acting as one; and church as a building on solid foundations – rock-solid in knowing, serving and worshipping Jesus Christ, Son of God. And remember, when we're weary and resources seem thin, it's Jesus who says, 'I will build my church.'