

Sunday 3rd September – Rev Alison Bruton

Sunday Praise

Reading: Matthew 16: 21-28

Peter: Rock and Sand



I expect that when you were given your pictures of rock and sand this morning your mind might well have turned to that well known children's song 'The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock'. While we did sing it at our last Criss Cross, we will not be singing it this morning. However, the contrasting images of the firmness and strength of rock as opposed to the yielding and weakness of sand will be useful as we take a closer look at the life of Peter.

Our Gospel text this morning gives us an example of the ups and downs in his life. If we recall the text from last week, we see a moment of revelation from God where Peter recognises Jesus as the Messiah. Then not long afterwards we see today that Peter is trying to dissuade Jesus from the course of action that would lead to such a dire fate in Jerusalem. This puts Peter and Jesus on opposite sides of a conflict, colleagues have become opponents.

Having received a special revelation from God, Peter immediately becomes mired in a human way of thinking. Having been blessed by Jesus he is now called Satan. The rock on which the church is to be built has crumbled into sand and is now impeding rather than supporting his Lord's mission.

So, what happens next? Well, at the beginning of Chapter 17 we read the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus where Peter is one of three disciples chosen to be present at this special moment when God speaks to confirm that Jesus is his son and instructs them to listen to him. Admittedly Peter does have a bit of a 'wobble' when he suggests building tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah; but the fact that following such a 'fall from grace' and being called Satan by Jesus is followed by being invited to participate in such a revelatory moment gives all of us hope that no matter how low we fall, God, in his grace, can and does lift us up.

This series of experiences for Peter made me curious about others that can be found in the New Testament; I'm sure that you will be able to name a few.

Hopefully you should have two pieces of paper, one with an image of a rock on it, and the other with a pile of sand. What I invite you to do is to use these as reminders and take a few moments to discuss with those nearby instances in the life of Peter...rock moments and sand moments. You can't include the ones I've mentioned so far! [SHARE THESE].

When I took a look across the New Testament it was fascinating to discover the number of references to Peter and then to ponder on his rock and sand moments. It looks like all of Peter's sand moments happen in the Gospels, and we have certainly identified a number of those already. However, when we look at the Book of Acts Peter has certainly become that rock of which Jesus

spoke and we discover so many occasions where Peter stands firm and fearlessly for his faith; in particular, risking the criticism of his fellow believers when he advocated for preaching to the Gentiles and even being imprisoned around the time Herod had had James, the brother of John, killed.

Let's just take a moment to try and put ourselves in Peter's place and reflect on perhaps the two most significant rock and sand moments. The rock moment is found in Matthew 26 where Peter says he will never deny or desert Jesus, and even when Jesus was arrested, we read in John's Gospel that it was Peter that cut off the ear of the High Priest's slave – surely this rock would never desert the one he had named as Messiah?

Sadly, we know the outcome, while Jesus is before the High Priest, Peter is confronted by some in the crowd outside as they gathered around a charcoal fire, probably they were curious as to what would happen next. Three times Peter denies he knows Jesus, what a sand moment! Hearing the cock crowing brought back that previous moment where he stood so strong and brave and now, he is reduced to a heap of tears. The smoke from that charcoal fire could not be blamed for his wet eyes, it was that deep sense of guilt and shame at what he had done.

I wonder how often we wish our sand moment had been a rock moment. How we wish we had stood strong for our faith rather than shrink into the background.

But, praise God, this was not the end of the story, as Peter was given the opportunity to receive affirmation and forgiveness from Jesus. In John Chapter 21 we read the story of Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire. Interesting that the Greek word for charcoal that is used here is only found in one other place in the whole of the New Testament and that is...in the fire where Peter was warming himself and where he denied Jesus three times.

So, by the Sea of Galilee Peter immediately saw the fire, what a reminder of his mistake; yet Jesus wanted to restore Peter. If we were to look further in the passage, we would see how three times Jesus asks Peter '...do you love me?' and three times Peter, with increasing vehemence, says that he does. The three denials are met with three affirmations: with each time a commission being given to Peter of his role in feeding his Lord's sheep.

So, when we look at the life of Peter, I think this gives hope to all of us. When we are in that dark valley, where we feel we have let God down, Jesus comes to us, acknowledges the mistake, but sends us back out on a mission. Jesus reminds us of the charcoal fire to help us remember what we've done, but this is not the end. We are taken back to the fire not in order to dwell there but rather to be moved beyond it and not linger over our failure. The risen Son of God moves us beyond our focus on failure as we move past the charcoal fire.

Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we fall flat on our faces. Provided we acknowledge the mistake, God continues to welcome us as part of the family and offers the opportunity to continue the adventure of Christian faith.

So, this coming week I hope you find the images of rock and sand useful as an aid to reflecting on your own experiences and, particularly, on the grace and forgiveness that are freely available from our loving Heavenly Father when we come to him in penitence.

Amen