

On this rock

'Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'" (Matthew 16:17-18)

These verses are very important in our understanding of how the message of Jesus spread around the world, through the teaching of Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem and further afield. They have also divided the church over an argument that Jesus' words effectively establish Peter as the first Bishop or Pope of Rome, and all subsequent Popes are his successors.

An alternative interpretation of these words is that Peter was the first person to fully understand who Jesus was, to make that great leap of faith and see in Jesus the Son of the living God. In that respect Peter is the first stone, the first member of the church that Jesus was founding. And over time others would make that same discovery and become living stones to be added to that very same Church of Christ.

In Ephesians 2:20 the church is said to be 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' and Peter himself in talking about the new believers says, 'As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house..' (1 Peter 2:4-8). Paul assures his readers in 1 Cor 3:11 that '..no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.'

We must be careful as to how we interpret the word translated generally as 'Church', which conveys all the baggage of institution, organizations, buildings and officialdom. Several commentators consider it likely that the word Jesus spoke was 'Qahal' (Hebrew) or 'Kenishta' (Aramaic), one used for the whole congregation of Israel, or Israel as a whole acting as the people of God. Jesus then confers on Peter the honour of being the beginning of a new people of the Lord, the first in a new fellowship of believers in Christ of which we now belong.

Study 1

Commissioned

Key verse

'I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49)

Opening discussion

How good are you at putting a name to a face if you meet someone out of their usual context, and do you have a defence mechanism to avoid embarrassment?



Touch me and see

(Read Luke 24:13-16, 28-49 or the whole passage if you prefer!)

The Gospels vary when it comes to the final days of the resurrected Jesus interacting with his apostles and other followers, but they all add to our understanding of how a group of uncertain and scared men went on to become the leaders of a fledgling church.

The story of the walk to Emmaus and an encounter with the risen Jesus is important in many ways. It allows the writer Luke to summarise his message and lead neatly to the continuing story in Acts. It has two men walking into a setting sun (perhaps mirroring their mood) and having a conversation with a fellow traveller without recognising who he is until they share a meal together. It demonstrates the ability of Jesus to bring clarity to the confusion that surrounded his followers. It shows the enthusiasm of those two men to share their experience with the others back in Jerusalem and find out that Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter.

Then Jesus appears again to the apostles and other followers and opens their minds to one of the big mysteries of Scripture. Various strands of prophecy and promise come together to form a picture of the Messiah, who God will send into the world. Sometimes the Messiah is seen as a shepherd who will lead and care for the sheep, at other times a crusading king of glory who will scatter enemies and rule with his rod of iron.

But then there's another image of the Suffering Servant, the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, despised and rejected, personifying the sufferings of the Jewish nation. Jesus helps the apostles to understand that the Messiah and the Suffering Servant are one person. The cross was a necessary part of God's plan because there, in a moment of time, can be glimpsed the scale of God's love.

And now, eyes opened, the disciples are tasked with taking Jesus' message of forgiveness and love into the bigger world!

Discussion

- 1 Jesus was revealed to the two in the breaking of bread. Although this was not strictly a sacramental meal, how important to you is the celebration of Holy Communion and why?
- 2 How important was that piece of broiled fish that they offered Jesus (v 42)?
- 3 How would you describe the Eleven at this time, and how crucial was this final meeting with the physical Jesus?

Becoming a shepherd

(Read John 21:15-19)

After sharing breakfast on the beach, Peter is put on the spot by Jesus, no doubt because the other apostles were aware that Peter had found his courage and faith lacking after Jesus was arrested, leading him to do the very thing he said he would never do, deny Jesus (Matthew 26:33).

Fortunately for Peter it would seem Jesus had not given up on him, hence the questions – one for each of Peter’s denials. The wording of the first question could be interpreted three ways.

1. Do you love me more than the others?
2. Do you love me more than you love these, your friends?

3. Do you love me more than all this stuff – the fishing boat, nets, fish etc.?

This was an opportunity for Peter to reaffirm his initial calling to leave everything and follow Jesus. It was also an opportunity to re-assess his relationship with the other apostles after his infamous threefold denial, and place that in the context of his devotion and love of Jesus.

Peter’s declarations of love brought him a task, to give his life to shepherding the lambs and sheep of Jesus’ flock. The practical proof of a believer’s love for Jesus is shown through love shared with others. Love often requires sacrifice and Peter’s love would eventually lead him also to a cross.

Discussion

- 4 How easy is it to be guilty of giving up on people after something they’ve said or done, without giving them the opportunity of a second chance?
- 5 How difficult to answer are the three questions above if we ask them of ourselves?

Quotes

‘Because I was suspicious of the traditional Christian church, I tended to tar them all with the same brush. That was a mistake, because there are righteous people working in a whole rainbow of belief systems - from Hasidic Jews to right-wing Bible Belters to charismatic Catholics.’ (Bono)

‘The Church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones.’ (Henry Ward Beecher)

The great commission

(Read Matthew 28:10, 16-20)

These verses present to us the last recorded words of Jesus to his followers in Matthew's Gospel. Verse 10 talks of 'my brothers' and this may well indicate that there was a wider gathering on the hillside. Paul in 1 Cor 15:6 talks about the resurrected Jesus appearing to more than five hundred 'of the brothers and sisters at the same time'. Matthew's emphasis is with the Eleven. Earlier in his gospel (chapter 10) we hear of Jesus giving a limited commission to the apostles to go among the Jews and preach about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus began his own ministry amongst the Jews, but now is the time for the world to hear the Good News. The commission they are now given is to be representatives of the Church-to-be. Not all of Jesus' followers at that time would be sent out into the world, many would be called to stay where they were and grow the Church in that place.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus appeared the Eleven worshipped him, 'but some doubted'. It is unclear who the 'some' were, and perhaps the best explanation is that the journey of faith is longer for some than others. The Eleven had seen the risen Jesus at least twice and their worship is intuitive, but others were less confident in making that response, and the promised Holy Spirit may have helped with their transformation a short while afterwards.



'Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'
(Luke 24:31,32)

'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'
(Matt 28:19,20)

Discussion

- 6 How do you handle doubt?
- 7 The disciples certainly had a calling, to teach and make disciples of all nations. How do you understand the idea of 'calling' in your own journey of faith?

Wait for the gift

(Read Acts 1:1-11)

This is the second volume of Luke's writings. The first is all about the life of Jesus on earth, and the second goes on to bring us the genesis of the Christian Church, a story which is of course still being written and is all about how the life of Jesus Christ continues within the lives of his disciples!

We are reminded that Jesus appeared several times to his followers over a period of forty days, but also that the apostles were not quite ready for the task ahead, with continuing confusion over the nature of the kingdom Jesus had talked about.

Steeped in Old Testament prophesy, the Jews looked forward to a day when God would break through into human history and bring a kind of political revolution!

Jesus gave a clue to the nature of this new kingdom when he gave his followers what we call the Lord's Prayer. Within it are the words, 'Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' (Matthew 6:10). This is

a typical Hebrew verse in which the second half amplifies the first, meaning a society on earth where God's will would be as perfectly done as it is in heaven, based upon love rather than power. And that would require a full experience of the power of the Holy Spirit, which is Jesus' promise to the disciples.

Discussion

- 1 Luke is keen to emphasise that Jesus 'gave many convincing proofs that he was alive' (v3). How much convincing did you need, and where did that come from?
- 2 What does verse 6 say about what the apostles' level of understanding was, just before Jesus was 'taken up before their very eyes'?
- 3 Jesus tells us that it's not for us to know times or dates that God has set. Can that be frustrating when stressing the urgency of giving all people the opportunity to respond to the message of Jesus?

Thought for Prayer

Pray for all those who are just embarking on a journey of faith, for those who walk with them offering encouragement and teaching, and for their family and friends, that they too might be challenged by this commitment.

Quotes

'My grandmother took me to church on Sunday all day long, every Sunday into the night. Then Monday evening was the missionary meeting. Tuesday evening was usher board meeting. Wednesday evening was prayer meeting. Thursday evening was visit the sick. Friday evening was choir practice. I mean, and at all those gatherings, we sang.' (Maya Angelou)

'My church is in the detention facilities where I preside and celebrate the Eucharist. To me that's the church. That's the people of God.' (Greg Boyle)