

Reflection: “On this rock I will build my church”

David Fotheringham, 23 August 2020

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

Bible reading: Matthew 16:13-20

Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

There are two themes running through this passage today – it’s like the passage flows in two directions.

In the first place this passage is about Peter’s confession of Christ. Peter has been following Jesus around for a while now, and has got to know him in all of his humanity and all of his divinity, and Peter recognises and confesses faith that he is the long awaited Messiah, the Son of the living God.

But then the passage flows the other way, too: Jesus well knows Peter in all of his flaws and all of his faithfulness, and Jesus names him as Petros, the rock.

Later in the New Testament, in the first letter ascribed to Peter, the role is reversed and Peter talks about Jesus as the Cornerstone, and ALL OF US as living stones when we come to the LORD and allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual house, a people proclaiming the praise and mercy of God.

So the first thing to say is that Jesus builds his church with people like us. Peter, like all of us, is both flawed and faithful. Peter is open to learning, and willing to have a go. A couple of weeks ago Peter was stepping out of the boat onto the water because he had his eyes on Jesus and believed; he also sank when he saw the wind and the waves; and cried out to Jesus for help. He proclaims Jesus as the Messiah in one breath, but is still on a learning curve as to what it means to follow the one who, though being in nature God, humbled himself in human flesh, was willing to be a servant, prepared to die, even on a cross; only then to be exalted. Along that path Peter denied and distanced himself from Jesus, but Jesus still brought him back again and loved him still. So there is certainly hope for us all; and the letter of Peter makes it clear that we too are living stones, learning and growing and able to share life.

That’s the first thing. The second thing to say is that it was Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, which prompted Jesus’ remark that “upon this rock I will build my church”. He didn’t just say “upon *you* I will build my church”, so that confession of faith is pretty central. That ties in with Peter’s letter about us all being living stones *when we come, with trust, to him.*

Over the centuries, and in our own time, confessing Jesus as Lord is no small remark. Like Peter, confessing Jesus as Lord is only the start of a journey of learning what it means to confess as Lord one who lives with generous compassion, with steadfast faithfulness, with inclusive teaching, confronting hypocrisy, seeking out the lost, forgiving sin, dying an ignominious death; and yet not losing faith, and not being abandoned in death... this is our Lord, which means that God is good, that God cares for our living, and that we are called to his faithful living too for the sake of the world.

“On this rock I will build my church” – The third thing to say is that Jesus does the building. The church is bigger than us precisely because Jesus builds it in Jesus’ own way with people like us, flawed and faithful, learning and trying. Earlier this we heard a message from the Uniting Church in Australia’s President, Dr Deidre Palmer, focusing on Jesus’ words to his disciples when they were worried by him walking on the water, saying “take heart, it is I, do not be afraid”. It is Christ who calls, equips and renews us. Deidre Palmer’s words can remind us that even the Uniting Church in Australia spans a very wide range of experiences and opportunities in this time, even as greater Melbourne is locked down. In fact, as a congregation WE TOO span a very wide range of experiences, as our gathering in worship across the traditional and contemporary services includes people from well outside greater Melbourne, and even interstate. It is a special blessing to share so widely in worship.

I want to say one more thing to tie together * Jesus’ confidence in people like us; * the church built on trust in Jesus and his way; and * Jesus building us, as living stones, to praise and proclaim God’s mercy for the sake of the world.

High Street Uniting Church is both a local church and something broader. If you are a local member of the church, you might get a phone call from an elder or a pastoral carer because we are in the process of tidying up our formal membership rolls. There’s no compulsion for anyone to become a formal “member”; it’s not a requirement, and for almost all practical purposes it doesn’t matter. That said, if you see yourself aligned with the faith and vision of High Street Uniting Church we’d be pleased to have you listed as a member, whether you’re local or further away! You’ll recall that our vision is

Connecting Younger Generations in God’s love

Strengthening Community through the Holy Spirit

Embracing All People with Christ’s compassion

and our faith is as Peter confessed it: that Jesus shows us God in flesh; and that his life, death and resurrection are our salvation and example. If you don’t get a phone call from someone and you want to be counted as a member of the church and you’re not sure if you are, then please get in touch with me.

The church is built of living stones, with Christ as the Cornerstone. Jesus once told a parable about building on stone verses building on sand. The wind can blow and the storm can rise, but we are built of living stones, built together *by* Jesus in his faithfulness and compassion. Peter’s strength was in his daring to trust Jesus in all that Jesus is. So I want to invite you, if you will, to say with me a brief confession of faith that is on your screen/order of worship, for it is on this rock that Jesus builds his church.

**We believe in God who created us,
who loves us and makes us whole.**

**We believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son,
whose life, death and resurrection
are our salvation
and our example.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit of God
who calls us to abundant life. Amen.**