

Dear all

It's always fascinating to me how another preacher tackles a sermon that I have preached. 2 Sunday's ago, during my holiday, it was a pleasure to visit St Guthlac's, Market Deeping. The Revd George preached an excellent sermon on Jesus walking on the water. I found myself ticking off points – yes, I would have said something like that... that's an interesting slant... etc.

Today the Very Revd Andrew Nunn, Dean of Southwark Cathedral, published the text of his sermon on the naming of Simon as Peter (Rocky!). I thought you might be interested in the geographical information he included:

Instead of the golden sands of the Costas we chose the shingle of Brighton; instead of the *Pueblos Blancos* of the Spanish hills we chose Cockington with its thatches and forge; instead of sangria and tapas we chose fish and chips and tea. This has been for many of us the staycation year. In fact, in some ways it was a gift. I hadn't been on a summer holiday in the UK for, well, maybe thirty-two years! Shaming isn't it. Driving around the south coast we realised what we'd been missing – and not all of it good things. But it did mean that I got to see places that I'd never been to before.

Can you believe it, I'd never been to Bath! I'd been there in my head of course, with Jane Austen and especially when I was first reading 'Northanger Abbey'. The impression that one of the characters had on arrival in the city was not mine.

*'The first view of Bath in fine weather does not answer my expectations.'*

I loved it – and especially I loved the stone. And it was stones that particularly made an impression on us in the journey we made. Not only had Bath evaded my attention – I'd never been to Avebury nor to Stonehenge – I can hear the gasps of disbelief even from the online congregation!

I knew what to expect of course. I'd seen plenty of pictures and watched enough documentaries about both places to have my head full of images and expectations. I knew to expect a bunch of stones, arranged in ways that we still don't really understand. What I didn't expect was how powerful those rocks would be. That was particularly true for me at Stonehenge with its distanced crowds of visitors, standing in some silence simply looking at the work of our forebears who'd dragged these immense lumps of rock to this section of the plain and with monumental effort raised them.

Jesus has taken his disciples on a bit of a trip. They've left the towns and villages around the shores of the Sea of Galilee, their usual stomping ground, they've taken a break amongst the hills in the north, what we now know as the border with Lebanon. The place they visited was where the River Jordan emerges from beneath the rocks, streaming out, fresh and clear and icy cold. Mount Hermon, snow-capped, stood majestically in the distance and they stood in this place where lots of visitors came to gawp at the rocks and the shrines to Pan and other Gods carved into them. It's a rocky place.

And here Jesus makes a joke. Looking around he calls Peter, Rocky, his rock, the rock on which the church would be built

*'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'* (Matthew 16.18)

People gathered rocks in Wales, huge stones and by one means or another moved them across the country to raise them, to create something sacred, to build what we might describe as some kind of church, holy place. People took their hammers and chisels and carved niches in the rocks from which the water flowed and created their shrines. Jesus took this man and called him the rock, the foundation stone on which he'd build.

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.* (Isaiah 51.1)

writes the Prophet Isaiah in our First Reading.

The stones standing there on Salisbury Plain for all these millennia have basically survived. The stones were well chosen by the keen eye of our ancestors. But surely Jesus really was joking when he called Simon, Peter, the rock. Here was someone deeply flawed, unreliable, flaky, the stone that would be rejected by the builder,

more sand than stability, nothing you would place a structure on with any confidence. Three denials in a courtyard, get behind me Satan, nothing in the story suggests that Jesus was not simply being ironic when in this rocky place he directed their attention to Peter.

Yet Jesus himself is the 'stone rejected by the builders that has become the keystone', a phrase from the Psalms that he himself picks up and uses. God does not build as we might build, God does not choose as we might choose, God does not test as we might test.

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.*

In his poem 'Choruses from the Rock', the poet T S Eliot says this

*And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored.*

The church is built of stuff like us, flawed, flaky stone. Almost every church we drove past, every cathedral we got into on our staycation travels had scaffolding, somewhere, rock was being replaced, stone was being renewed. 'Always decaying and always being restored.' Perhaps we should have chosen better stone with which to build. But Jesus chooses Peter and God chooses us, the living stones of which the temple is built.

The pandemic has so many challenges for us, but for the church some fundamental ones. Who are we and what will we be? We call it 'ecclesiology', how we understand the church. It was the challenge from day one as Jesus and his disciples turned their backs on the rocks and headed for the lake where Peter would sink in the waters. Some rock? Some church?

But the stone rejected by the builder breaks free of the rock hewn tomb where he has been laid and lives, and an elderly man wearing the shoes of the fishermen stands in an empty quarry like church on Easter Day, Peter's successor, and in his weakness and vulnerability looks strong. And we, living stones, build and are built. But into what?

**God, build us, your living stones into your living church. Amen.**

Benedict returns to London this week in preparation for his new year at college. We will be losing our excellent sound engineer, and I am grateful for Benedict recording the services, balancing the sound etc. He has also taken a role in reading, leading intercessions and stewarding.

We are struggling to fill rotas for all aspects of our service. If anyone feels called to read, steward, or lead intercessions (if necessary, we can supply them – it's just nice to have a different voice), please let me know. Even if you don't feel quite confident, why not give it a go? In so doing, you will be a blessing to us all.

A few weeks ago, I was becoming acutely aware of how the virus was dragging us down. The initial panic had subsided a bit, lockdown was easing... but there were so many restrictions still. And these were getting us down, especially because there was no end in sight.

My thoughts were drawn to two sources of reflection about the mundaneness and even tedium of life.

George Herbert, in his poem *The Elixir* has this to say:

*All may of Thee partake:/ Nothing can be so mean, /Which with his tincture—"for Thy sake"—/ Will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this clause/ Makes drudgery divine:/ Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws, /Makes that and th' action fine.*

(You may recognise the poem – we sing most of the verses as the hymn *Teach me, my God and King.*)

This led me on to reflecting on the tradition in Celtic Spirituality of turning everyday activities into spiritual events and times of reflection by prayer. A classic example is the smoooring or damping of the fire at night. Here is an example:

*I save this fire, as noble Christ saves; Mary on the top of the house and Brigid in its centre; the eight strongest angels in Heaven preserving this house and keeping its people safe.*

I had the thought that, if we could have prayers that would take up those mundane, tedious, life-sapping aspects of coronavirus behaviour, and prayerfully reflect on them, taking us out of ourselves and into the wider context, this might be very helpful. I suggested this to Nick Fawcett, and after mulling it over, here are his responses:

A prayer for putting on a mask:

As I put on this mask, Lord,  
may your strength protect me,  
your love enfold me,  
your peace encircle me,  
your light inspire me,  
your power renew me,  
your wisdom guide me,  
your promises comfort me,  
your truth fill me,  
your grace transform me.  
Come Lord,  
and grant your blessing,  
your help –  
a lamp for our feet –  
to me,  
and to all.  
Amen.

A Prayer for Washing Hands:

As I wash my hands, Lord,  
cleanse my body from infection,  
cleanse my mind from unworthy thoughts,  
cleanse my heart from evil,  
cleanse my spirit from what keeps me from you,  
cleanse my being from what devalues me as a person,  
cleanse my life of all that degrades and destroys.  
In your mercy, Lord,  
wash me,  
and make me truly clean.  
Amen.

A Prayer for Physical Distancing:

As I keep my distance, Lord, from others,  
teach me to respect them,  
to value them,  
to acknowledge them,

to care about them.

Though I must keep apart,  
for their sake as much as mine,  
remind me that we belong together,  
bound by our common humanity,  
by your love for all.

And though I must keep many still at arm's length,  
may that only be in body and not in spirit,  
my concern for them not being diminished but enlarged –  
my love,

my compassion,  
my desire to reach out and respond remaining as real as ever,  
and finding new ways in which it can be expressed.

Keep us safe, Lord,  
keep us well,  
keep us strong,  
and though for now we must stay apart,  
keep us also together.  
Amen.

I would heartily recommend his blog, at <https://nickfawcett.uk/> You can sign up to receive each new posting by email.

Finally, I haven't shared music for a while. Here are 2 motets on Jesus' statement to Simon *Tu es Petrus* (You are Peter):

First Palestrina: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQhPw8EtP5c>

Then a more modern treatment, James MacMillan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLVnhfYHyJ0>



Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark