

St Mary Magdalene's Anglican Church
Moore Street, Adelaide

Reflection for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost

We are the Rock

I began to go to my first school at the age of 4. Apparently I had worn out the local kindergarten the previous year, and so my mother sent me to the school where she had been educated, St. Peter's Grammar School. There are photos of me, at that time, in a navy blue tunic, and a large navy velour hat. And I look as though I can't keep my head up. And I probably couldn't. Because, perched at the front of my velour hat, was the school badge, a large heavy metal badge, about four inches high ... enough to weigh any four year old's head down. And on this impressive badge were the crossed keys of St. Peter. They appeared everywhere in the school; on our blazer monogram, and emblazoned on the front wall of the school. They were even woven into the blue carpet, all the way up the aisle in the parish church of St. Peter's, Glenelg.

Those crossed keys are the symbol of Peter, the Apostle: Rocky, as Jesus called him. And the symbol goes right back to the gospel set for today. Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am." And he gets a variety of answers. "And what about you? Who do you say I am?" It's Peter, never one to stand back, who replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus does not tell him he's bright boy to have worked that out all by himself. Rather he tells Peter that he is blessed by God. For Peter has not discerned this by his human intelligence, or lack of it. It is a revelation which God has given him which allows to make this response. Peter's response is an act of faith. And that faith is a gift *from* God, and the gift *of* God. Then Jesus gives Simon a new name, Peter, *petros*, "the rock" in Greek. "On this rock I will build my church," says Jesus, "and the gates of death shall never conquer it." The symbol of Peter's authority in the church, which Jesus says he will give to Peter, are the keys of the kingdom. The authority of the church, symbolised by the keys, entails binding and loosing.

Today, I want to focus on Jesus saying to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death shall never conquer it." It is one of the most controversial pieces of Scripture. The interpretation of this Scripture has divided the church for centuries, especially at the Reformation. And it continues to be a contentious issue right up to this day. In the early church, it was taken to mean that the authority of the church rested with Peter, and subsequently to the successors of Peter, who in turn became Bishop of Rome, or as we later termed that position, Pope. This interpretation has remained dominant in the Roman Catholic Church, but it has not gone unchallenged. In 1054, the Eastern church, the Orthodox, split from the Western church, and no longer accepted the authority of the Bishop of Rome. By the time of the Reformation, the Western church, that is, the church under the authority of Rome, was in such disarray, with so many corruptions and perversions of practice, that many regional and even national churches removed themselves from the authority of Rome. (And did so, one must admit, for other reasons also, as in the case of our own Anglican Church.) These breakaway churches, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Anabaptists, to mention some of the early ones, were said to be "protestant" in that they protested against living under the authority of the bishop of Rome.

But what did they make of the text we are looking at this week? "*You are Peter, and this rock I will build my church.*" Remember, this had been taken to mean, down the ages, that the leadership of the church was given to Peter and to his successors as bishop of Rome. The Reformation scholars interpreted this Scripture to mean that the *faith* of Peter was the rock on

which Jesus meant to build his church ... not Peter himself. This understanding allowed them with clear conscience to separate themselves from the authority of Peter's successors, the Pope of the day. However, it does beg the question, "Why did Jesus not say so?" Furthermore, why did Simon *continue* to be called Peter by Jesus, and the early church, if the rock, the *petros*, referred only to his God-given faith."

I think protestant scholars in later times, came to see that this interpretation was just a bit too convenient, and not true to the exegesis of Scripture. In recent years, protestant scholars have increasingly agreed that Jesus did indeed give authority to Peter. It is clearly written. But they claim that this was a once-and-for-all role, given to Peter only to establish the foundation of Christ's church. They see the power of the keys, the symbols of the authority of the church, as being given, after Peter, to the Church as a whole.

Well, where do we Anglicans sit in all this argy bargy? Anglicans, like the eastern Orthodox from its time of splitting with Rome, hold that authority of the church does indeed lie with the successors of Peter, but not just the successive Bishops of Rome. Our church, and the Orthodox, are *episcopal* churches, where the authority lies with the bishop, the *episcopus*, of a diocese. It is the bishop who hold the power of the keys, the power of binding and loosing. The episcopate is a shared authority among all the descendants of the apostles, but each bishop holds the authority within the diocese. Not the Primate ... not the Archbishop of Canterbury ... the bishop of the diocese has the authority. The Archbishop of Canterbury has a spiritual leadership and seniority, and is often called *primus inter pares*, first among equals, in the Anglican Communion: but he has no authority here.

Well, it's all very interesting. But does all this have anything to do with us here as Anglicans in the Diocese of Adelaide? Well, I think it does. We need to understand why we are Anglicans, and not belonging to some of the protestant denominations. Why aren't we Roman Catholics? What is the difference between us and the Roman Catholic church? (The answer to that one is "Not much".) "Why can't we just all get together and be one church?" many ask. We Anglicans and Lutherans founder mostly on the rock of Peter, on the question of the absolute authority of the papacy. We may well think that Pope seems a nice enough bloke, so why don't we just accept him. But scholars look behind the man, to the interpretation of scripture and to the principles involved. At present, there is much work being done between Catholics and Lutherans, and Catholics and Anglicans, on the authority of the papacy. There is movement towards accepting the bishop of Rome as a first among equals, without denying the authority of the diocesan bishop. However the Catholic church maintains its position of the supremacy of the Petrine office of the Papacy.

There is a second issue in this reading which speaks to us very much as Christians in a post modern world, where the church seems to be very much on the wane. It has been pointed out that the Church is always one generation from extinction. If we don't spread the Gospel, it will be just one generation away from disappearing from the face of the earth. It's a compelling idea, isn't it? It enhances our sense of Christian responsibility. We need to get out there and work for the Gospel or the Church could fade into history. I read the report of this parish's response to the recent National Church Life Survey. There are some very encouraging statistics in the document about this parish ... the strength of leadership, the commitment to social justice, the strength of our community, our welcoming and friendly nature. There was one statistic which struck me though ... it was about participation in evangelism, mission, outreach, whatever you might call it ... 14% of people involved ... not that the diocese was much better at 17%. And there is great room for improvement in readiness to share our faith with others.

You may have heard the story about Jesus appearing in heaven just after the Resurrection. Moses is there, and asks him, "Well Jesus, did you leave things in capable hands?" Jesus responds, "I did. I have left behind Mary and Martha and Peter and the other disciples." Moses said, "What if they fail?" Jesus said, "Well, I have established the Church and filled it with the Holy Spirit and they will carry on." And Moses said, "What if they fail?" Jesus replied, "I have no other plan."

Whether the church lives or dies is dependent on our generation, on you and me ... and in particular it is dependent us in the church in the place of St Mary Magdalene's. We are acutely aware of this as we are facing difficult circumstances in the life of this parish. And it is not just a question of money, but of the viability of this congregation as a strong vibrant group of Christians ... sometimes as we look around at the number of us at worship on Sunday mornings, like Moses, we could be tempted to be a bit anxious.

The gospel today shows us that we need to look at Peter and his response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am". And Simon Peter says, "You are the Christ the Son of the Living God." Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

If we truly can say with Peter to Jesus, "You are the Christ," and believe it in our hearts, and let that belief overwhelm us, then things fall into place in the Church. We will want to be here together Sunday by Sunday to worship the Living God. We won't be here just because of a roster, or to meet our friends though that is a good thing. We will be here in the response of faith to worship ... our faith will impel us. And we will want to share our belief with others, our faith will impel us.

When I was about five or six, one summer afternoon I drifted into a beach mission on the lawns at Glenelg. It was quite something let me tell you. But that afternoon I did learn that children's song,

*The wise man built his house upon the rock,
And the rain came tumbling down.
The rain came down and the floods came up,
And the house on the rock stood firm.
The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
And the rain came tumbling down.
The rain came down and the floods came up,
And the house on the sand fell down.*

You are Peter, I am Peter, we are Peter, we are the rock. On the rock of our faith in Jesus, and only on that rock, will his church survive. Jesus has no other plan.

The Revd Sr Juliana SI