

**Sunday 3 September 2017**  
**Twelfth Sunday after Trinity**

I want to talk about three things. I want to talk about rock; I want to talk about rock; and I want to talk about rock. Rock, rock and rock – three things – and none of them from Blackpool or Brighton.

Today's gospel was one of the many stories about St Peter getting it wrong, saying the wrong thing, putting his foot in it – he's famous for such things! In St Matthew's gospel, this episode follows hard on the heels of last week's reading – the story of Peter recognising Jesus as the Messiah, being commended for his insight and being told that he would be given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This business of holding the keys of the kingdom has led to the proliferation of what are known as "pearly gate jokes" – an important part of the great English literary tradition. People die and then they meet Peter at the pearly gates of heaven, and engage in amusing banter.

Once upon a time, there was a great flood. A man was stranded in his house by the rising water. Rather than flee, he decided to put his trust in God. He said his prayers and asked God to save him; and then sat back and waited for salvation. He stood at his front door, behind a barricade of sandbags, and a man went by in a little rowing boat. He offered to take the stranded man to safety, but he declined, saying that God was going to save him.

The waters rose ... and he looked out of an upstairs window. A teenager paddled by on a surf board and offered him a ride to safety. Again, he declined, confident that God was going to save him. The waters rose ... and he took refuge on the roof of his house. The air ambulance helicopter flew overhead, and a man leaned out and shouted down to the man on the roof, offering to hoist him away safely to dry ground. Again, the man declined, placing his trust in God's salvation. The waters rose ... and rose ... and rose. And the man perished in the flood. On arriving at the pearly gates, he took issue, vigorously, with St Peter. "There's been some mistake – I asked God to save me from the

flood, so what am I doing, stood, standing here, before the pearly gates?" he said.

"Be reasonable," said St Peter, "He sent you a boat, a surf board and a helicopter – what more did you expect?"

I suspect that's a joke written by a good evangelical, because, as well as its humour, it also carries a message about God answering prayer in the way he thinks best, not in the way we decide is best – and it's also about seeing God at work in unexpected ways and places.

As well as being given the keys of the kingdom, Peter – previously called Simon – is given his new name, which means "rock" and he's told that he will be the rock upon which Jesus will build his church.

There's a well-known parable about two people building houses, one on sandy ground and one upon the firmer foundation of a rock. When floods and winds come, the house on the sand falls down, but the house built on the rock stands firm against the battering of the weather.

St Peter the Rock is to provide a firm, solid, reliable foundation on which to establish and build a church – not a building made of bricks and stone, but the church of Christ, comprising the minds and bodies of his disciples – the "living stones" as St Paul calls them.

We, too, are challenged to embrace something of this quality of a rock – to be committed to the church of our own day and reliable in our faith. We are to be people who grow daily in the faith, by prayer and the study of scripture. And our faith is to be something visible – something strong that others see – something that may encourage them to learn about Christ – something that helps the Church to grow – in numbers, in depth of discipleship and in its impact on the community around us and the world in general.

The first rock – for reliability, stability, commitment and firmness – a challenging ministry and mission for St Peter – and for us.

But, as I said a few minutes ago, **today's** gospel reading is about anything but a firm rock – it presents another side of Peter – this time,

the one who gets things wrong, the one who's tactless, the one who opens his mouth and puts his foot in it. I know the feeling well.

"Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things," rebukes Jesus. Calling one of your best friends, your closest disciples "Satan" doesn't say a lot for them. It's not quite as life-affirming as "You are the rock on which I will build my church, and I entrust the keys of the kingdom to you."

A rock can be something that's firm and secure. But rock can also mean something that's wobbly, something that rocks from side to side, something that's anything but firm and secure. And this sort of rock gives us great encouragement. It says that we don't have to be perfect; our flaws and imperfections are part of who we are – for St Peter and all the saints, as well as for us.

God takes and uses us in his mission in the world, even with our shortcomings. If he can build a church that has lasted for 2,000 years on the rocky foundation of Peter, the wobbly one, then he can continue to grow his church with us and through us, despite our flaws and weaknesses.

Peter was one of the disciples who were fishermen – Jesus taught them to apply the skills they had with their nets in fishing for people and growing his church, something they continued to do after his resurrection.

Being wobbly in our faith doesn't mean that we have no ministry and mission to fulfil – God calls all of us into his service, both the firm rocks and the rocky rocks.

So two rocks – one for a firm foundation and one for our capacity to be less than perfect.

One more! There's a common phrase about "rocking the boat." This is about deliberately making something wobbly, as distinct from being wobbly because we can't manage anything better. This is about challenging things that are wrong, upsetting the apple cart – both in our

own lives, and in our communities and the wider world. It's about challenging and destabilising the status quo when the status quo needs challenging.

You may have heard Ronald Reagan's famous definition of status quo – he said, "It's Latin for the mess we're in."

Status Quo is also the name of a rock 'n' roll band, the members of which are all older than I am. But three things to talk about is more than enough – I won't be tempted by that fourth kind of rock.

If we look at the world of today, there are so many things around us that need to be challenged – so many boats that need to be rocked, so many apple carts that need to be upset. We are surrounded by so many bad things – places where people, sometimes of the same faith, can't or won't live together in harmony. Places where people are judged and treated harshly because of the colour of their skin, or their social class, or their faith or their politics, or for many other reasons and prejudices. Places where the God-given resources of the earth are not shared even remotely equitably among all its people. Places where government policies are determined by personal greed and ambition, rather than compassion and concern for others.

A really important part of our mission – as firm rocks of the faith and as wobbly rocks, riddled with imperfections – is to rock and shake and challenge things that are wrong in ourselves and in the world – and never to accept the status quo just because it's the status quo – because it may well be nothing more than the mess that we're in, and not something sacred and unchangeable.

A donation to Oxfam for their work in Syria might be part of our response to the utterly appalling situation there – like so many other places today. The donation might be part of our way of helping to rock the boat, to challenge injustice, oppression and prejudice.

As Jesus looked at Peter and saw potential for the foundation of his church, God is still looking for firm rocks on which to continue growing the church; even if those rocks are wobbly and imperfect. And he's

challenging those rocky rocks to rock the boat of injustice, hatred and oppression in his world.

And he's looking at us – at you and at me. Amen.

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