

Easter 4 2021

Some years ago I attended the wedding of two friends. The best man was addressed throughout by his nickname – Rocky. I reasoned that he had been chosen because he was reliable -strong as a rock – a good quality for a best man. When my friends returned from their honeymoon, they told me how relieved they felt that the wedding had gone off without a hitch, ‘Choosing Rocky as best man was risky,’ the groom said, ‘but he is my oldest mate after all’. I was clearly looking puzzled because the couple went on to explain that this young man had been given the name Rocky because he was rather lacking in stability and could be unpredictable – he rocked about.

That conversation made me go back to the name that Jesus -the bridegroom - gave to his best man, Simon. The Gospels tell us that Jesus gave him a new name – *Petros* (Peter), which in Greek is very close to the word *petra*, usually translated rock. So, Jesus was making a pun – Peter the rock. But that’s a bit odd because, although the gospels are written in Greek, Jesus was almost certainly speaking Aramaic in that conversation with Simon. And here is where it gets interesting. You may recall that Simon had another name – it’s used in John’s Gospel and by Paul in his letters. The name is *Cephas*. *Cephas* (originally pronounced something like *Kêphās*) was Simon’s Aramaic name, and it means stone.

‘Cephas the Stone’ has got rather lost in translation; and that’s a pity because it has a somewhat different flavour from ‘Peter the Rock’. One feels large, strong, and secure, something you can rest against or build upon; the other feels smaller, a potential annoyance or irritant if it gets in your shoe, or even a trip hazard. Simon, Cephas, Rocky.

It’s only recently that I’ve noticed the way that Peter – and I’ll call him that from now on - liked to talk about stones in his teaching. In today’s reading from Acts he quotes Psalm 118 and says,

'...Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'

And in one of his letters he quotes the prophet Isaiah:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Peter goes on to repeat that this stone was initially rejected by the builders and to assert, again quoting Isaiah, that for those who do not believe it is,

"A stone that makes them stumble..."

There is something touching and poignant about a man who was named Stone by his master finding the image of the stone in the scriptures and using it to proclaim that same crucified master. And here's the thing - for both Peter and Paul the image of the stone is closely bound up with Jesus' death.

The crucifixion was the ultimate act of rejection by the political and religious authorities who seemed blind to Jesus' true identity. Its horrific and squalid nature was a real stumbling block to people who were looking for a powerful, dignified, and heroic messiah. Yet it's Christ-*crucified* on whom everything pivots, who holds everything together; and he is found to be not a shameful embarrassment at all, but in Isaiah's words someone 'chosen and precious' and in Paul's words, taken up by Isaac Watts, someone to glory in and boast about:

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the Death of Christ my God:
All the vain Things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his Blood.

But in today's reading Peter talks about more than the crucifixion. He says this:

...let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, *whom God raised from the dead.*

This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.

'Whom God raised from the dead'

If the idea of a crucified messiah is a stumbling block, the claim that he rose from the dead feels like a whole rockfall. Or, to mix metaphors, like Alice's conversation with the Red Queen:

Alice laughed...and... said; "one can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.

Are we as Christians, like Alice in Looking-glass Land, being asked to believe upside-down, inside-out, impossible things? How do we know that the story of a man who was executed and came back to life is true, and if it is true how can we know what it means?

Here we come back to Cephas the stone, that rocky human being who kept getting things right and then getting them wrong. I seem to recall that last time I preached I talked about the Transfiguration and how Peter got things right by saying 'Lord it is good that we are here' and then got things wrong by over-thinking and trying to put Jesus in a box with Moses and Elijah.

But most famously Peter got things right by following Jesus as far as the courtyard of the High priest's house when all the other disciples had fled, but then got things terribly wrong by denying Jesus three times. And along with the other disciples, after Jesus had been crucified he barricaded himself into a room in a safehouse, terrified of arrest and of suffering the same fate as his master, a confused, defeated, and all but broken man.

And then something happens. This group of people change. They go out onto the streets of Jerusalem and with great courage, joy, and passion proclaim good news. They don't seem to be afraid any more. They can speak in a way that means that they are understood by people of many different languages and cultures, Jews first, but later gentiles such as Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch. Wherever they go they bring healing and life, and they are prepared to die the most brutal of deaths in service of their crucified lord. Peter is still the same person who walked the shores of Lake Galilee with Jesus perhaps skimming stones with him, yet he is profoundly transformed, as are all his companions.

As many of you know, I'm a psychologist and it's the psychologist in me that tells me that the resurrection is true. People don't change in that dramatic and permanent way without a good reason. More than that, trauma psychology tells us that the first followers of Jesus are unlikely to have changed if they had simply seen the empty tomb and believed the message of the angels. They changed because they met Jesus risen from the dead, and with the coming of the Spirit, they felt his continuing presence with them in everything they did.

Their view of the world changed dramatically. But just as important their view of themselves changed. They saw that they, with all their faults and weaknesses, were redeemable and redeemed. Nowhere is this made clearer than in that breakfast by the lakeside in which Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him and then commissions him to pastor his flock. It is obvious that Peter is forgiven, but more than that he is raised up to a new dignity and high calling. He is rocky but he can become a rock. He is raised with Jesus to new dignity and purpose.

Later Peter would write:

Come to him, a living stone,...and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

This is what the life, death, and raising of Jesus means; rocky human beings like us with our public and secret flaws, can become living stones. We can connect with other living stones to making a dwelling place for God; because of Jesus we are not on our own; we all have the capacity to be holy, and we are all called to be priests.