

**Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August 2020**  
Sermon by Rev. Peter Lyth

**A Prayer of Confession**

Lord, I acknowledge before you  
that often I can be like Peter:  
hearing your word but going off on my own track,  
not wanting to see your path, especially if it looks rough.

Forgive me, Lord,  
and set me on your path.

Lord, I acknowledge before you  
that there are times when I want the world,  
but don't give much thought to my soul.

Forgive me, Lord,  
and help me to take up my cross.

Lord, I acknowledge before you  
that there are times when  
I am a stumbling block to others – and to myself;  
times when I look for complications  
instead of just following you.  
Forgive me, Lord,  
And help me to follow you.  
Amen

**Reading:** Matthew Chapter 16 verses 18-28

**Sermon**

If you ever go to New York (less attractive at the moment due to COVID-19), one of the “must see” attractions is the Empire State building. Although it lost its accolade as the World’s highest building in 1970 to the World Trade Centre (sadly lost in the Twin Towers terrorist attack in 11/9/2001). It was thereafter the tallest building in New York until 2012 and is still the 7<sup>th</sup> highest. It was completed in 1931, designed by Shreve, Lamb and Harmon and has 102 floors, being 1,250 feet (380 metres) high. It’s art-deco style still commands fascination and it is a frequent feature in films, for example the climactic finish of “Sleepless in Seattle”, the first being “King Kong” in 1933. The view from the top is simply stunning. Since that time, the Empire State building has been joined by a multitude of skyscrapers as Manhattan is the economic centre for the US.

One of the reasons why the small island of Manhattan is populated by so many tall buildings is its geology. It is formed of hard rock (specifically a mica schist known as Manhattan schist). This particular rock is ideal for the foundation of skyscrapers. So, literally, this is the rock on which the city is built.

I have taken the liberty of taking a small part of the Lectionary Gospel reading for last week and adding it to the one for this week. I have a good reason for this, the contrast between the role of rock in the description of Peter. For in this first section, Simon Peter is told, “And I tell you that you are Peter,<sup>[a]</sup> and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades<sup>[b]</sup> will not overcome it”. (Petros being the Greek word for Rock so this is very much a play on words). But in a very short while, after Jesus has elaborated on what his mission will entail, the mood changes – Peter is described as a “stumbling block”. A stumbling block is a very different rock. It is literally a “trip hazard”. It’s something to be avoided and can be the cause of considerable injury. Many visits to Southport & Formby A&E are the result – literally – of an encounter with a stumbling block. But why the change?

In the first instance, Peter has just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God. It is that confession that is the basis of the church, as we confess Jesus Christ is Lord. Incidentally, the word “church” appears only twice in the Gospels, both times in Matthew’s Gospel and one of them is here. This was said to be a divine revelation but is one that is the basis – the foundation on which the church is built.

But then things “go south” very quickly from there as Peter protests that Jesus cannot take the path which he has described – to Jerusalem and the cross. It’s worth remembering that the Messiah in popular thinking was a person that was a successor to King David – a figure similar to Judas Maccabeus who would drive out the Romans. Instead, Peter and the disciples were presented with something else entirely. But here’s the rub. Peter’s reaction shows a completely different standpoint from before – in the first instance he has said something that is inspired by God. But here – in the second instance, he is told, “you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns”. In fact, that is prefaced with, “Get behind me, Satan!” which sounds even more harsh. The Greek words for “Get behind”, refer to the clearing of an obstacle and also tell Peter his proper place falling into line behind Jesus. But why the reference to Satan? This goes back directly to the temptations in the wilderness. The three temptations that were presented to Jesus were ones that sought to divert Jesus from his mission and here too was a temptation to take another, easier path. So, in Jesus’ eyes, Peter was aligning himself, not with God but with the tempter hence the swift and crushing rebuke. Seen from Peter’s viewpoint, You might rephrase his declaration as, “Certainly God will be gracious to you Lord and not let this happen!” - he wants to push away the idea of vulnerability, the idea that suffering and death could be part of being the messiah was unthinkable. He wants to see Jesus be a “successful” Messiah – but ultimately on earthly terms.

But what does it have to say to us in 2020?

It reminds us that the Gospel story is not one of unalloyed joy. There is no resurrection without there being Holy week and Good Friday and the Cross first. We would like to think that maybe there is another way – an easy way to gain life without losing it and a way to being a Messiah without suffering and death. I have a feeling that this is still an uncomfortable truth for us in the church now as we sing songs of triumph rather than laments of suffering. There is often an assumption that the people of God are protected from suffering - are cocooned away from bad things. Here Peter and the other disciples are told that to follow Christ means that instead they are called to the same path.

This message was very relevant to the church of the time as they were persecuted by the authorities. This is true of many people around the world now. Here it is not so much the case, persecution being replaced by indifference as the church is often regarded as increasingly irrelevant. However, we are still challenged as we follow the ways of Christ's teachings – ones that very much contradict worldly wisdom.

Ultimately, they are a strong foundation on which we build a strong church – not strong as in powerful in the traditional sense, but strong as authentic to Jesus. Do we seek out Christ's teachings as the bedrock of our lives? We are told at the end of the reading that ultimately we will be judged on how our thoughts and actions hang together. They are the concern of the returning Son of Man who himself resisted the tempting of Peter and instead fulfilled his calling in Jerusalem.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord God, you reproached Peter because he had only human concerns;  
but Peter just wanted to protect the one he loved.

We pray for people the world over who find themselves in difficult situations.

We pray that they would all have someone to care for them and lift them before you.

We pray for all who are persecuted for their faith:

for all who are misunderstood, for asylum seekers who flee real danger in their homeland.

We pray for those who work tirelessly to address wrongs.

We pray for people whose lives don't always work out right,  
through their fault, or through no fault of their own.

Merciful God, hear our prayer.

We pray for the people in our lives who need your protection, Lord,  
that we will always be faithful in prayer for them.

**Merciful God, hear our prayer. Amen**

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