

Built Upon A Strong Confession

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: August 27, 2023

Readings

Isaiah 51.1-6

Psalms 138

Romans 11.25-36

Matthew 16. 13-20

Opening

Well, we have reached that moment in the dog days of August when sitting outside is insufferable. Walter Winchell said, 'It's a sure sign of summer if the chair gets up when you do.' I'd like to sit on my front porch again, a favorite pastime, without chair clinging so closely. For in milder days, I like to watch the sun fall at dusk and listen to the bird's song. On my front porch, other songs circulate around me on the weekends, too, though these songs are generated from a Spotify playlist of 90s pop. At first, I wondered why my family was teaching me long-suffering, playing boy band hits from yesteryear; but then, I discovered the music wasn't coming from within our house. The way our house is positioned against a ridge nearby, an odd echo effect occurs. Music originating well behind our home from other houses moves across field and ridge, so that it seems like the music is right next to you on the *the front porch*, though it's behind me some distance away.

Scripture has echoes, as well, and they sweep across narratives so that the past comes close. St Matthew especially wants his readers to hear echoes from other scriptures in his Gospel. When Joseph and Mary take Jesus into Egypt, fleeing from King Herod's rage, Matthew tells us a story echoing Moses, even saying, 'Out of Egypt I have called my Son.' Other echoes abound in Matthew's Gospel, some of which are plainly obvious, others which Matthew *likely* intended; still other echoes may be present that the Holy Spirit has inspired which transcend the consciousness of the human author.

Now, Scriptural verses or passages cannot mean just anything you want; therein lies a dangerous road that could lead to heresy—Lord, have mercy. But that doesn't mean that scriptural passages mean just *nothing*. The Word of God is a mystery, which means that it contains heights and depths we will never reach. Scripture contains a surplus of meaning that we will never exhaust.

So, just as *themes* in Scripture echo forward—themes such as love, grace, mercy, or forgiveness—recurring **images** or **figures** create echoes, too, disclosing deeper meanings in the mystery of God's Word. Tracing images and figures can lead us deeper into God's truth and his Gospel message to us.

This is called a figural reading of Scripture. If you're interested to read Scripture more in this way, I commend the scriptural work of Peter Leithart to you, particularly a book called *Deep Exegesis*.

For today's purposes, I want to explore one particular image in our Gospel reading. It can be an illuminating study to note the objects or metaphors in a reading and then ask, 'where else do these appear in Scripture?' For example, in today's reading we have rocks, gates, and keys. Time forbids me to explore all three, so I'll focus on the rock and briefly the keys.

Before we look more closely at the figure of the rock, though, I'd also say this isn't just an intellectual exercise to stimulate our minds. Always, always we read Scripture to hear God addressing our hearts. So with that in mind, let's look at Matthew 16 again, picking up at verse 17.

Of Rocks

'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'¹ Here is a well-known text, and one that has been invoked with spirited debate about church authority, specifically the papacy. Was Jesus establishing a future papacy or was he teaching something different about the church? In the midst of that debate, we can miss St Matthew's use of the rock in his Gospel. The rock has an echo, if you will, within Matthew's Gospel and we have the benefit of hearing that more readily because of our Sunday lectionary the past three weeks.

Two weeks ago in my return to Apostles, I spoke from the Gospel reading in our lectionary when Jesus concludes his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7. You may recall the focus of my meditation, which was Jesus' magnificent parable about a wise man, *building his house on the rock*. The sound behind us has echoed forward. The Right Reverend NT Wright believes Matthew intends us to make the connection between the parable of the wise man in Matthew 7 with Peter's confession in Matthew 16.²

You may recall from two weeks ago that I explored the image of the rock in that parable; that the rock is not only useful for a nice story about surviving a storm, but that the rock represents Jesus' entire teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. It's a way of saying that the Beatitudes are solid all the way down, all the way through; that the teaching on the inner life, the virtues, the life of prayer, forgiveness and reconciliation—they're solid all the way down and all the way through.

In that parable that concludes the Sermon, Jesus focuses on how his Kingdom way can be trusted, no matter what trials or difficulties may come. This is why we continually return to the Sermon on the Mount at Apostles, because here we have the best summary of the Kingdom of God. We not only believe this is true, this is what we trust to help us stand strong.

At Caesarea Philippi

That's how the rock image works in the Sermon on the Mount. But it takes on *added* meaning when Jesus gathers his same disciples in a different place, in Caesarea Philippi. It doesn't have just one meaning. When Jesus asks the disciples, 'who do people say that I am?' you can hear how ancient Jews

¹ Matthew 16.17-18

² Wright, Tom. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004.

read Scripture—they read with figures in mind; they were listening for echoes. ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

And then that personal address—it is not what others say, who do you say that I am? And then Peter confesses what he could not have achieved by logic, only by the gift of faith that comes from the Father in heaven, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

It is the confession that changes everything. Peter has confessed by faith, with the heart, the truth about Jesus Christ. And he has no idea what that *really* means, what awaits him, what this confession will require. We’ll look at that more next week when we read part II of this story.

But the confession is the foundation. Faith is the bedrock for this house. Jesus Christ is not simply a Prophet or Preacher, a Miracle-Worker, Pastor, or Priest—no this is the Christ, the Anointed One, the only Son of the living God.

And then with this confession, the rock image returns. ‘And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.’ We hear the echo from the parable of the wise man, it’s nearly the same phrasing, but now Jesus gives the image more meaning. *The sense is this: Jesus is not only building up wise individuals, he’s building up his church and his church must be a fortress, a bulwark, a strong tower of righteousness against the powers of darkness.*

Our foundation is not that we simply have intellectual agreement with the ethical teachings of a charismatic teacher from Nazareth; no, we confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and we confess his teachings are the very words of God Himself. We are called to build up the church; not only our own personal faith.

This confession is the solid rock. Yet this confession will not come without opposition. Jesus revealed the kingdom of light in the Sermon the Mount, but the kingdom of darkness desires the undoing of that glorious kingdom Jesus came to establish. How will that Kingdom prevail? Jesus Christ will build up his church.

We may know these stories so well that in our familiarity, we overlook the simplest things. Yes, Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and earth, and guess what? He’s entrusted the authority that is his alone to his church—to the apostles. That’s where another figure in this text comes into play—the keys. Think of the owner of a great estate or household. What do these owners often do? They recruit someone they can trust to order the affairs of the whole house. For all our Masterpiece Theatre fans, think of Lord Grantham and Mr Carson. What does the lord of the manor give to his steward to order his house? The keys. The keys are a sign of trust and authority.

Now here is where Anglicans do see a scriptural warrant for the office of bishops. We’ll leave aside the whole papacy debate and just focus on the fact that the apostles and their successors became bishops of the church through history, across the world. And here is the first take of any bishop: keep and defend the faith once and for all delivered to the saints—the household of God. It’s why we pray every week for our bishops.

In Anglican life, you also might hear a bishop called ‘the Ordinary,’ which may sound really archaic. But that means the bishop must order the church by keeping first things first: he must keep the confession of faith Peter made, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.’ When bishops uphold that faith—and we have godly bishops who believe this faith with all their heart—it orders the rest of the church for the work of the Kingdom we are called to do. And when the church orders her faith well, they do the work of the Kingdom—the kind of work Jesus called us to do in his great Sermon.

The Kingdom advances, attacking the powers of hell and darkness wherever they establish strongholds in this world.

Jesus not only wanted his saints to be established on the rock, he wanted his church, 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,'³ as St Paul said later, to bring down strongholds of the Enemy. That is why he entrusts to Peter and his Church the work of 'binding and loosing.' By confessing the Name of Jesus Christ and abiding in his power, we bind the works of the Enemy—of shame, violence, division, and hatred—and we let loose the power of God's Word and his grace that heals broken lives.

Peter's Name as Destiny

It's fascinating to read the two letters of St Peter when you remember his confession at Caesarea Philippi. Peter fully embraced his vocation in Christ and he built up the apostles and the church, often using the same figures and language of the Lord himself.

Consider 1 Peter 2.4-6:

1 Peter 2:4-6 (ESV) As you come to the Lord, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Next week, we'll continue in this episode at Caesarea Philippi, but to conclude for now, let us see how determined God is to make us solid. Not only to withstand trials, but to be made strong together as his people. And that's not only for our encouragement; there's a lot at stake. There's a kingdom of darkness that opposes us. But Christ who has conquered by his Cross and Resurrection and Ascension, gives to his church authority to bind the works of the devil and let loose the truth and grace of God that heals. Let's become solid together, confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, unto ages of ages. Amen.

³ Ephesians 2.24