St Peter, Blackland - Sermon for Petertide 2018

by the Very Revd James Atwell,

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Sunday 24 June at 3pm

Lessons: Jeremiah 31: 31-34

 Mark 1: 21-31

Thank you to Bob Kenway for the invitation to be with you for this patronal festival, and thank you to Isabel Gage who has, I think, been influential in the background. I have a lifetime of memories of this little church. It was here that I preached one of my first sermons while still a student. An occasion organized by Alice Wilson, when the Wilson family were in the big house. My memory goes back to Isabel's pony weeks and her mother's lavish catering for those events. The churchyard has family burials, and that includes my own brother Richard and his wife Hasell.

That is just one bite of memory that this little church holds over the many generations who have come and gone here. We are the latest in its story, as we gather to celebrate the life and memory of St Peter, Prince of the Apostles. Petertide has become a significant marker in the calendar of church life as men and women are ordained deacons and priests in the cathedrals up and down the land. Next weekend will see Salisbury Cathedral minting a new generation of clergy prepared to meet an ever changing and developing expectation of ministry and mission.

Just as Blackland holds many memories for those present, so it was Capernaum which held many cherished memories for St Peter. It seems that although Jesus was brought up in Nazareth, it was at Capernaum that he made his home base for his Galilean ministry. That may well have been because the fishermen brothers Andrew and Peter were based there, who were among his first disciples. They seem to have worked with James and John, whose father Zebedee owned his own boat. According to St John's Gospel the brothers Andrew and Peter originated from the nearby fishing village of Bethsaida (John 1:44). Probably Peter moved to Capernaum when he got married. We had the domestic story in our second lesson of Jesus curing Peter’s mother-in-law of fever. Capernaum, which is right on the lakeside, would have been very convenient for the fishermen.

If you visit Capernaum today, you can still see the outline of the streets as they were in the time of Jesus and Peter. Archaeology has revealed the village of that period, which was subsequently abandoned and, therefore, escaped being developed or obliterated by later layers of habitation. You can visit the synagogue, built on the site of the one referred to in our lesson. The village itself, with its street plan revealed, is based on a pattern of simple housing; each unit comprises a number of dwellings built around a private courtyard. Each extended family had their modest dwellings opening on to that shared courtyard. The accommodation is very simple and only one storey. The walls are of local black basalt volcanic rock, rough hewn. They could only have supported fairly light roofs made of palm branches and other material gathered from local sources. That makes absolute sense of the story, as you may remember, of the paralytic being let down through the roof while Jesus was teaching. The dismantling of the roof would not have been a major exercise.

What is perhaps more surprising is that when you visit Capernaum, a house is pointed out as being that of St Peter. When I was first aware of this, I supposed it must be the result of vivid imagination. However, there does seem to be strong archaeological evidence that this might well be the case. One house very early on was adopted for communal use and subsequently became an octagonal place of worship. The finds in this particular house indicate that a fisherman lived there and graffiti witness to its becoming a very early place of pilgrimage. It does seem that history has rather amazingly left us indication of the very place where the events of this evening’s second lesson actually took place. The years roll back.

The humble dwellings gathered around a single courtyard enabled families to find room for their expanding numbers. When Peter got married he could move into the family property, still live communally, but have the independence of his own little quarter. There was always the potential to squash up and make room for another. When Jesus says: ‘In my Father's house are many mansions’ (John 14:2; ‘mansion’ being a King James Bible extravagant translation for a ‘dwelling place’!), I always think he has in mind the humble courtyard dwellings of Capernaum. One more could always be squeezed into the family complex.

We refer to Peter by the nickname that he was given by Jesus. In fact his Jewish name was Simon or Simeon. Jesus gave him a new name when he said to him: ‘You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I shall build my Church’ (Matthew 16:18). *Petros* in Greek, or *Cephas* in the Aramaic of Jesus,means rock. He is often, therefore, referred to as Simon Peter or Cephas. No doubt Jesus recognized in Peter someone who could lead the pack, as he did when he was the first to recognize Christ as the Messiah (Mark 8:29). Yet, he could also get things badly wrong. He refuses to accept that Jesus might have to live out the role of a suffering Messiah. It earns a stern rebuke from Jesus: ‘Get you behind me Satan!’ (Mark 8:33)

Peter is a flawed human being like the rest of us, and it is that defective humanity upon which Jesus insists that he will build. It is indication that God does not take the advice of the wayside wise person to the effect that: ‘If you want to get there, I wouldn't start from here!’ In Jesus we see God accepting the good and the bad in all of us, and through patience, forgiveness and love drawing the best from us.

The episode in St Peter's life which most obviously reveals his human weakness is the threefold denial of Christ after his arrest. Peter has the loyalty to follow Jesus to the place where he is to be interrogated. However, his courage fails him when he is recognized as a follower of Jesus. A serving girl identifies him and confirms her suspicions by pointing to his Galilean accent. Peter the third time insists with oaths: ‘I do not know this man’ (Mark 14:71). Then it is that the cock crows. Peter weeps.

That story is told adjacent to the narrative of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus and taking himself off in despair. I often think, if only Judas had waited for the forgiveness of Jesus things might have been different. One hopes that in the healing of eternity, Judas found the love of Christ. St Peter found that grace this side of eternity. St John's Gospel recounts the reinstatement of Peter in Christ's resurrection appearance (John 21:15ff). Three times Jesus says: ‘Do you love me?’ Three times Peter is recommissioned: ‘Feed my sheep’. Jesus takes the flawed humanity of Peter; he does not pretend that the denial has not happened, but insists that he still has confidence in Peter despite everything. In Jesus there is a deep acceptance of that side of Peter’s humanity which Peter himself would rather not acknowledge. It is in loving Peter as he is, that Jesus enables him to become what he had the potential to be.

There is in that a parable of the message of Jesus. It was characteristic of Jesus that he did not wait for repentance before he declared to people the love and acceptance of God. It was that which so shocked the Pharisees and others keen to maintain moral rectitude. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is criticized because as a religious leader and teacher he associates with those reckoned beyond the pale.

He kept the company of the quizzling tax collectors who were considered to be collaborators with Rome; he didn’t shun the prostitutes and he touched the leppers who were normally ostracized. The principle by which Jesus lived was that people are transformed by sharing with them the love of God rather than restricting God’s grace to the reformed penitents. Unconditional love must precede penitence. Jesus pointed to the overwhelming grace of God as Creator, who makes the sun shine on the good and the bad, and who sends his rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45).

He insists that it is only when we know that we are overwhelmingly loved and accepted that transformation takes place. It seems to have worked. You remember the tax gatherer Zacchaeus at Jericho, so overwhelmed that Jesus was going to dine with him without condition, he announces: ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anybody of anything, I will pay back four times as much’ (Luke 19:8).

That is the love of God which meets us in Jesus. It was that quality of sheer grace, of undeserved love, which reinstated Peter and gave him back his self-respect. It is in revealing God’s love as being there for each one of us, as we are, without condition, that Jesus enables us to become what we have the potential to be: ‘Something beautiful for God’.

One final point about St Peter can conclude our reflections this afternoon. Peter, the rock, becomes the foundation witness of the resurrection of Our Lord. In a very particular way he becomes the rock on which Christ’s Church is established. We would probably never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth, had it not been for the remarkable and mysterious fact of the resurrection. The first disciples were shaken by this unexpected event. They had to be able to put forward witnesses if they were to be believed. Although Mary Magdalen appears to have been the first witness, which has the ring of authenticity about it, in a patriarchal society women’s evidence was not sufficient. As the first male witness of the resurrection, Peter’s evidence was given a primacy. He became the guarantor on behalf of the apostles.

St Paul in the remarkable short creed he hands on to us in I Corinthians 15 states that Jesus ‘appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve’ (v 5). When the disciples on the Emmaus Road rush back to Jerusalem to report their resurrection appearance, they are told by the apostles: ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ (Luke 24:34).

Simon Peter was well known in the early Church as he travelled about in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor and Rome. For as long as he lived he was the guarantor of the truth of Christ’s resurrection. He stood out as the key witness.

It was in the event of the resurrection, of which Peter was the key witness, that the Christian Church was able to discern in Christ more than a prophet who taught people of the overwhelming love of God. Rather, they discerned the very overwhelming love of God himself ‘who when we were still far off met us in his Son’.

AMEN.