

Worcester Cathedral

Sermon on Trinity 12, Sunday 27 August 2023

Isaiah 51.1-6, Romans 12.1-8, Matthew 16.13-20

Strong and stable. With its alliteration and confident sound it is an appealing phrase. It is an aspirational slogan which might be applied to a host of things: situations, individuals, and communities. Why would anybody not want to be either strong or stable? Today as we have references to the firm foundations of the Jewish tradition rooted in Abraham, and especially in the gospel the commissioning of Peter, we are drawn to images of strength and stability – for faith and for the Church which are rocklike, solid, and steady.

And once again, as so often, the image of stability and strength is placed upon the figure who is often not strong, not stable, and characterised (if not caricatured) as faltering and hesitant. Peter is an apostle who sits in the same frame as Thomas – we love to see them as deeply human, flawed with fragility on which Jesus builds strength, stability and hope.

Blessed Peter, the rock on which Jesus builds his Church, the prince of the apostles, the fisherman who is bidden to fish for people. As tempting as it is to cast Peter into this weakened character (as I have just done) we miss something of the call of the apostle if we simply see him as weak made strong. The journey from one state to the other is not instant. And neither will it be for us.

I was standing in this pulpit during Lent when we considered the temptations of Jesus and the devil's suggestion that Jesus throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in order to test God's power. Then I ended by suggesting that the place of the pinnacle, the parapet, however fragile, unnerving, and precarious, is the place we spend most of our lives and God is there as much as he is in our places of safety.

Now, six months on the pinnacle of this cathedral's tower, the stone dislodged by Storm Arwen nearly two years ago, is to be replaced. New stones, old stones, skilfully, beautifully, and painstakingly carved – loved into shape with intricacy and expertise by our own Cathedral stonemasons, are to be hauled up the huge scaffolding and wedged with the great tower. Our own stone, our rock, repaired, renewed, restored. Please pray for our stonemasons in the coming weeks, and especially as the relative warmth of August changes into the cooler autumn and winter days.

Splicing new stones into old is a feature of ancient buildings and one which on the whole adds beauty and interest to our churches. However not everyone finds that newness exciting. I was given a copy of Alec Clifton-Taylor's *The Cathedrals of England* when I was 14 and read it over and over, so much so that his phrases and opinions have shaped by love of church architecture. However he is not always kind. Some of his descriptions of this cathedral of Worcester might surprise us:

'Worcester is a building of potential distinction, at presently seriously compromised internally by unworthy Victorian fittings which go far towards spoiling one's pleasure...

marred by a platitudinous screen, some very nasty seating, horrible floor tiles, and a lamentable (and all too prominent) reredos, as well as an abundance of indifferent stained glass’. Well don’t hold back Mr Clifton Taylor. Despite his words embedded in my thoughts all those years ago, I have grown to love this place and gathering as a community here this morning, I think we find ourselves enrobed in beauty old and new. Mr Clifton-Taylor was not always right.

Again he says, *‘outside, drastic re-facing following upon the decay of the soft local sandstone has deprived the cathedral of all its texture’*. And this truth is based on the almost constant need for the renewing of stone work in cathedrals made of sandstone. Worcester, like Lichfield, Chester and Carlisle cathedrals is built of a friable sandstone which suffers from weathering and general deterioration. Add to this the casualties of the dissolution of the monastery, the civil war, and overly-zealous restorers and what we have is a building which has that lived-in face, a charm which reads as a record of geological and historical circumstances. It is its beauty as well as its scar.

There is a point to my architectural ramblings and I shall come to that in a moment, but first let me allow Clifton-Taylor to redeem himself, and as it is still summer and we can afford a picturesque detour, let us bask in the beauty of this place as we hear his words about the very part of the cathedral we gather in this morning:

The choir, eastern transepts and retro choir [at Worcester], begun in 1224, constitute the leading example of the mature Early English style of architecture in the West of England... a work breathing self-assurance, in the triforium to the point of virtuosity ... the profusion of lancets, the richness of mouldings, the wealth of stiff-leaf carving and lavish use of Purbeck marble. A triumphant example he says.

‘Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.’ Isaiah’s words speak to those who would pursue righteousness, those who seek the Lord. The invitation is to a journey, not merely to a destination. Arriving at a place without any sense of where you have come from or how you have got there takes away a good deal of the pleasure.

The prophet calls his listeners to remember from whence they came – the rock from which they were hewn, the quarry from which they were dug. We cannot deny who we are or where we were from, any more than the stones of this church cannot be anything other than the green or red sandstone or limestone. Isaiah calls his listeners to be rooted strongly in their past, their heritage, the foundation of their faith even though they look to the future, they raise their eyes or to the earth beneath.

The Lord is on the move and Isaiah bids us to look to the future but not to uproot ourselves from the past. It is our identity as children of Abraham which strengthens and stabilises us for the great work which God has in store.

Knowing who we are is not a modern concept of wellbeing, identity, or authenticity, but a deep fundamental call for human beings which is underpinned in our Christian faith by the knowledge that Christ calls us because of who we are, celebrating our identity, and using our core being as the rock on which he secures his deep love for us. In the scriptures God is always the rock, but in our first reading we have Abraham and Sarah as rocks themselves, and in the gospel Jesus calls Peter to be that rock too.

We are not just hewn from the rock but we are also deeply connected with it. Like Peter we are the rock, the living stones, through which Christ secures his love for us and gives us that deep security and strength which calls us ever forward.

Let me finish with returning to this building and also the call to journey – a call which at first seems at odds with the solidity of stones and rocks but which Peter exemplifies in his following of Christ and Jesus' renaming of him. If you stand in the Dean's chapel and face west, looking up into the quire aisle, you will notice that the arch and wall is bulging so much that it appears precarious and worryingly abnormal. It is a rather carry reminder that this building has settled much over the years. The weight of the vault and the central tower took its toll on the rest of the quire and eastern transepts and we now see a wall which, although strong and stable, took some time to find its resting place.

Once again in the restoration of the pinnacle, this cathedral receives new stone, hewn from an ancient quarry, and added to the ever-changing face of this building. As friable as stone, we too are hewn, cut, shaped, and cemented within the body of Christ. We are not finished products, but neither are we shapeless obscure building blocks. We have history and future, like this building we, and indeed the whole Church, have bulges and cracks and pressures and misshaping.

But like Peter and his call to become the rock, we are all of us called by Christ to be part of this rock, this edifice of the Church, living stones in all our God-given glory. We are not perfect, and we are not going to be while we live on earth, but God quite likes that, and Christ calls us to be part of the building of his Kingdom.

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. We, yes you and me, are Peter, and on this rock Christ builds his Church.

Stephen Edwards
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