

Both 'rock' and 'jelly baby' ...

... but God forgives

A sermon given on the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity 27th August 2023 – by Rt Revd Bishop David James, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 16:13-20

Was Peter a stick of rock with 'Messiah' written right through the middle? Or was he a jelly baby? Was he 'Captain Courageous'? Or was he 'Cowardy Custard'?

Who do men say that I am? Who do you say that I am? - it's Captain Courageous who speaks out: "*You're the Messiah, the son of the living God.*" Jesus commends him and promotes him, "*Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. I tell you, you are Peter [Petros]. And on this rock [Petra] I will build my church.*"

'Simon' - says Jesus - 'You're a rock. Someone I can rely on to lead my disciples. Someone who won't let me down.'

But was he really the creme de la creme? Or was he a load of froth to be blown away at first hint of trouble? Jesus calls Simon 'Son of Jonah.' Perhaps he's referring back to the comic sketch in the Old Testament, to the fishy tale of the prophet who when God told him to go to Iraq decided instead that Spain would be safer. Or perhaps Simon, Son of Jonah could simply be his name, literally 'Simon Johnson'. He could be sitting here this morning: one of us and like us; both faithful and faithless; courageous in our commitment to Christ and cowardly; stick of rock and jelly baby.

Simon Peter's famous failure was when Jesus was on trial at a kangaroo court outside the high priest's house. But the story illustrates Peter's courage as well as his cowardice. You'll remember how they arrested Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. We're told that a cohort of soldiers came to arrest Jesus. Now that's between 200 and a thousand men and Peter, the idiot, wielded a sword against them until Jesus stopped him. Then Peter, alone among the disciples, dares to follow to where Jesus is to be interrogated. But his courage deserts him - two serving girls and then a bystander challenge him, 'Hey, you're one of the Galileans gang, aren't you?' 'No, I'm not. I am not. I don't even know the man.' Luke tells us at that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed; the Lord turned and looked at Peter; then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him before the cock crows today you will deny me three times. And he went out and wept bitterly.

What did Jesus' face say to Peter, I wonder. Well, we don't need to wonder. We know. Because we know that after his resurrection Jesus appears to Peter beside the Lake of Galilee. And three times Jesus asks, "*Simon, Son of Jonah, do you love me more than these others do?*" And three times Peter replies, "*You know, Lord, that I love you.*" Three denials, then three times the question - three times the answer to wipe out the denials and to restore the relationship.

Here in these associated incidents we see what sin really is: Peter's denial is a betrayal of love. When we wrong someone, we betray their love and we deny our love for them. So we see also what forgiveness really is: it is the assertion of love in the face of betrayal and the restoration of a relationship that has been broken. And it's a pure gift - it's an act of grace.

In our Gospel reading, when Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus didn't only give him a nickname, he also gave him a job to do, "*You are Peter the Rock and on this [Peter the] Rock, I will build my church.*" Jesus is succession planning. You, Peter, he's saying, will lead my disciples when I am no longer with you.

Did Peter, after his dramatic denial of Jesus, lose that calling? No, he didn't. There by the lakeside, when the risen Christ reassured Peter three times that the bond of love was not broken, three times he reaffirmed Peter's calling - feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.

Peter, the failed Peter, the betraying Peter, still has his calling. In fact, it's as if Peter had never let Jesus down. As we go on to read in the Acts of the Apostles about the life of the early church and of Peter as the leader of the church, we read of Peter as the 'stick of rock'. And on the odd occasion, we also read of Peter the 'jelly baby'. Christ redeems human nature. Through his spirit he transforms human nature. But it's always still a work in progress.

May I share with you something of my own story? I was confirmed when I was 15 and called by God to be ordained at 16 and I went off to a church leader and selection conference and I was accepted at that at 19. But then as an undergraduate, I went downhill as a Christian. Nothing dramatic that will get my name in the papers, I reassure you, but downhill nevertheless. Until at 21, through a series of circumstances, my love for Christ was renewed as my eyes and my heart were opened afresh to God's forgiveness and his loving mercy. But would God still want me as a vicar after I'd let Him down? Yes. I found I still had something of the gifts which I would need and God gave me the chance to use them even as a research student. As the hymn puts it 'Ransomed, healed, restored,

forgiven' and forgiven again and again and again and again and again and again.
Because, brothers and sisters, even at my advanced age, I'm still a work in progress.
When I first became a bishop, I was in the congregation for a licensing of a new vicar, watching how to do it. I felt very conspicuous in my new purple shirt (in fact, it may well be the purple shirt I'm wearing 25 years later). As the procession of visiting clergy came down the aisle at the end of the service, one of them who knew me from my time was a vicar in Sheffield, stopped in mid procession and laughed out loud and said to me, "It's all of grace, David. It's all of grace."

One day, Jesus was teaching his disciples about the importance of forgiveness. Peter became rather exasperated by this teaching, "*How often must I forgive my brother who sins against me?*" he asked, "*as many as seven times?*" "*Seventy times seven*" answered Jesus.

So how often will God forgive us? Here, I believe, is the key to the kingdom of God: God forgives, and we children of the kingdom are called by God to live out that forgiveness, that grace, that generous love. It takes courage. And we fail. Because, like Peter, we are to a greater extent or a lesser extent both rock and jelly baby, but ...

... God forgives.

Reading Text

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.