



GRAY'S
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Sermon preached at Mattins in Chapel St Peter the Apostle (June 30th 2019)

Matthew 16: 13-24 & Acts 11: 1-18

What kind of leader do we want? What matters most, policies or character? What do you do with a man who says one thing and does another? Do you admire his impetuous enthusiasm or point out the flaws in his personal behaviour?

I refer of course to St Peter, whose feast day we celebrate today. Peter was far from perfect but (perhaps in contrast to some today who see themselves as leaders) he was a man of integrity who sought forgiveness for his failures and was not afraid to admit when he had got it wrong.

Peter's story starts well, on the shores of Lake Galilee. "Follow me" and immediately he upped sticks and became one of the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It's the beginning of a long journey. He emerged as a leader, especially when they reached Caesarea Philippi, as we heard in the first lesson. He was one of the first to recognize that Jesus was indeed the Messiah: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". And, "on this rock" – that's a pun on the name, *petros*, Peter – "on this rock I will build my church".

But having reached the heights he drops to the depths. Jesus goes on to say what kind of Messiah he will be, that the way forward lies through suffering and death. Peter immediately jumps in to say No, that cannot happen to you. And he gets the rebuke: you are a stumbling block, you are getting in my way.

It happens again on the night before Jesus died. Everyone else may desert you, says Peter, but not me. Hours later he is denying that he has ever met Jesus, the cock crows, and he breaks down in inconsolable tears. Only after the Resurrection does he hear the words of forgiveness, and the commission, "Feed my sheep".

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the Early Church. Peter has become its leader, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, but it's still a Jewish sect, until... the Holy Spirit had different ideas. As we heard in the second Lesson, he becomes convinced that this Good News is not just for Jews but for Gentiles also. It takes some courage for him to change his mind. He is criticised for doing this new thing. Later on, in Antioch, he bends to the criticism, compromising his position, until St Paul takes him to task.

St Peter is a man on a journey, experiencing the ups and downs of faith, but through forgiveness facing up to his failures, and – this is my main point this morning – learning how to embrace the new things that God was doing. New things, like calling manual labourers rather than educated priests to lead his Church. Like turning the Messiah concept upside down, from powerful Judge to Suffering Servant. Like creating a new community in which all people, whatever their religious or ethnic origins, could belong and flourish. Like taking a religion based on Law and transforming it through the new starting point of Grace.

Given all of this, it's somewhat ironic that the Church which was built upon this rock favoured Papal power and centralised authority. Far from being open to where the Holy Spirit might lead next, the successors to St Peter claimed infallibility and outlawed dissent. There have been some exceptions: the enlightened Gregory the Great who sent St Augustine to Britain, the support which St Francis received from Pope Gregory IXth, more recently John 23rd in the 1960's, and most of all Pope Francis today who has allowed the breath of fresh air to flow through the Vatican and around the Roman Catholic Church.

The challenge is knowing when to change, and where change is to be seen as the leading of the Holy Spirit rather than just following the ways of the world. We are being encouraged to worship and to spread the Gospel in new ways, but while numerical growth is always welcome, such success does not necessarily mean that they are right. And this also applies to issues. I name just one, the question of Gender and the increased fluidity of Male and Female.

I raise it because we are approaching the twentieth anniversary of something which happened in Swindon during my time as its first bishop, and doing a couple of media interviews this week has brought it all back. I had gone off on study leave to write a book on human sexuality and returned feeling that I had come up with something quite radical and possibly controversial, only to find something for which I was totally unprepared. And this was about a Peter as well.

In 1996 we had instituted Peter Stone as Vicar of Upper Stratton. He was also a chaplain in the Territorial Army. Three years later he was undergoing medical and psychiatric treatment leading to his request for Gender Re-designation. He became the first Church of England priest to go through sex reassignment surgery, and became Carol Stone. Some months later I processed back into church with her, and apart from one protestor, and four people who left the congregation, the church welcomed her back with open arms.

Carol died in 2014, after many more years of faithful service. Since then the debate about gender has grown, and in church circles there is disagreement between those who say "Male and Female he created them" and that's that, and those who believe, or at least want to explore, that, as from the beginning of the Church, God may be having new things to say to us.

And somewhere in all of this there is the issue of Character. The character of those who seek re-designation, and our character as we respond to them. I must admit that, twenty years ago, it took me some time to come to terms with what was happening. I hosted a Press Conference on Carol's return, but I declined to be photographed with her. I am still not totally comfortable with all the issues which it raises. But at the time, for me and for her congregation, the compelling point was that he / she was a person of great faith, believing that this was where God was calling her, and that she would be a better priest by being who she really was.

These issues will not go away. And the Church, as it has always done, will find itself asking where God is leading us today. On this his feast day, we may take some comfort from St Peter, full of faith and deeply flawed, failed and yet forgiven, and pray that like him we may rest in the God who calls us, who restores us, and who sets us going again on the journey of faith.