



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

You are the Christ

Readings: Isaiah 50: 5-9, Ps 114, James 2: 14-18, Mark 8: 27-35

I can never hear this morning's Gospel without being drawn back across the years to the very beginning of my ministry and my first real encounter with Catholic theology.

It was thirty-six years ago and I was coming to the end of my deacon year in the Anglican Church. Part of my painful duty was to attend the monthly ecumenical meeting of the local clergy. Coffee, sandwiches and inconsequential and manufactured bonhomie for an hour while we contrived to ignore the accumulating number of elephants in the room – every one of them a barrier on the road to unity.

In an act of youthful enthusiasm I tried to break the log jam. Perhaps, I ventured, we might achieve more if we took key passages of Scripture and talked about how our churches (and we – not always the same thing for non-Catholics) understood them – tease out the difficulties, shore up the common ground.

So there we were in the church room at the 'Methodrome' (as I used to refer to the architectural eyesore on the East India Dock Road), our first text in hand and our theological wits finely tuned.

'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.'

What did we understand by this? A variety of responses took their turn.

The elderly Anglican rector said that he thought Jesus had chosen Peter but there was no continuing Petrine office. The Baptist minister thought it had nothing to do with Peter *per se*. Jesus was commending the statement of Faith as the rock on which all was built. The radical Methodist minister had done his homework and thought that Jesus could well have been referring to the great rock which towered over and defined the geography of Caesarea Philippi, a place of ancient pagan worship.

All eyes turn to Fr. Bill McConologue, a simple plain spoken Irishman.

'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church', he repeated in his soft brogue. 'And', he continued, 'I think Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said.'

It was my first encounter with the reality of how fundamental and faithful Catholicism is to Holy Scripture and why, in its teaching authority of the Papacy, the Petrine Office, it maintains a unity that non-Catholic organisations never can. The discussion never recovered and we went back to coffee and sandwiches. It was my personal tragedy that it took me a further twenty five years of wrestling to accept Fr. Bill's simple truth and come home. (May he rest in peace).

The other part of that text is, of course, Peter's statement that leads Christ to make His astonishing announcement and appointment. While the other disciples have been canvassing opinion on Jesus, Peter has been brooding on his own personal response. The disciples discover only what we would discover in a street survey now. Some think Jesus is a good man, some think He is a prophet, some think He is a reincarnation etc. etc. None of this makes a ha'porth of difference.

When Christ asks what they themselves think it is Peter alone who speaks and proclaims the revelation to the Church. *'You are the Christ.'* He could have had little idea of what this truly meant. He would spend the rest of his life finding out.

We read these gospel accounts with the glorious benefit of hindsight and history. But stand for a moment in Peter's shoes, as all disciples must who will make that life changing declaration. He may have thought that he was allying himself to the one who would set Israel free, politically, geographically. A new kingdom waiting to be born.

One thing is for sure, Peter will not have known what you and I know. He will not have known then that this was God incarnate. He will not have known that the road to this kingdom would lead through Calvary. He will not have known that this kingdom would be inaugurated by Resurrection and lead to eternal life. He will not have known that he would be granted extraordinary powers and authority in the physical and spiritual realms. He will not have known that 2,000 years later his successor would still be occupying the seat of Christ's authority above the very resting place of the martyred saint himself. Peter will not have known that this was the salvation of God for all the world. Peter will not have foreseen the

journeyings and the hardships. Peter will not have a hint of the crucifixion by which he would emulate his Master and His Lord. Peter will not have dreamed of a civilisation that grew out of his preaching or the extraordinary reality of you and I sitting here at Mass united with all the saints throughout the world and throughout time, glorying in the Real Presence, bringing our sins to the Sacrifice, learning to know and love the same Lord Jesus.

Peter only knew what God had vouchsafed to him then and there and it was enough. We are no different. From the day when we first made that declaration that we accepted Jesus as the Christ our Saviour we have not known where that journey would lead on the long road to Heaven or the strange and sometimes costly travail.

All we know is that it is true and that it is the singular hope of Man. As we follow in Peter's footsteps, we affirm that sovereign truth and listen to his teaching that leads us ever onward in the Way of the One recognised as Christ first at Caesarea Philippi and then down all the ages since.

Faith has consequences. Only the beginning and the end are known to us. For us, like Peter, the rest is the trial and the adventure.