

# **Sermon on Sunday 30 August 2020**

## **by Rev. Wendy Sellers**

Imagine God is writing a job advertisement. He needs someone really special for a unique role as number one disciple to the Messiah and future CEO of a new faith called Christianity.

So, what is God looking for?

Perhaps the advert might go something like this...

*'Could you achieve miracles as an acknowledged leader of a group, to be known as 'the apostles'?*

*'The Son of God will be shortly recruiting a large number of disciples. From this group he will select 12 as his senior management team. A unique position is therefore about to be created as leader of this team.*

*Do you have what it takes?*

*We are looking to recruit someone with experience in leading large organisations. Our ideal candidate will be willing to travel widely and be fluent in several languages, including Greek and Latin. Men only need apply.*

*The successful candidate will be an accomplished speaker and writer. A major task will be the production of a Gospel, narrating the ministry of the Son of God. This will be co-authored with God himself.*

*Tact and a cool head are required for this role, as it is anticipated there may be significant opposition from external authorities, and possibly from within the new organisation which the candidate will help establish: current working title The Church.*

*This role is what will be known in the church as 'self-supporting or non-stipendiary'. While it can be guaranteed to offer interest and variety, even excitement, it has to be acknowledged that there is the possibility of some danger also. This unfortunately means that God will not be offering standard life insurance with the position.*

*Please send in your CV quoting two Pharisees as references.'*

So, who got this job?

The wonderful man known as Simon, or Peter, or sometimes both.

Over the past few weeks, the lectionary has taken us on a bumpy journey of Peter's faith. We had Peter trying to walk on water. Peter lacking faith and nearly drowning. We had the example of the Canaanite woman and her contrasting great faith. Last week, we had Peter answering Jesus' question – 'Who do you think I am?' – with these words: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

We have gone from Peter having not enough faith, to Peter perhaps being taught a lesson in faith by a stranger, to Peter at last realising who and what Jesus is. Surely, he's got enough faith now?

But today it becomes clear that with Peter nothing is straightforward. Because having seemed to realise who Jesus is, in this week's passage he thinks it's a great plan to tell Jesus that he's wrong. When Jesus tries to explain what lies before him, Peter isn't having any of it. And Jesus has to explain, yet again, that the job of the Messiah is not at all as Peter has envisioned it.

You would hope that Peter, the rock on which Christ's earthly church is to be built, the one to whom Jesus will entrust the keys of Heaven and Hell, the lead disciple, would learn on this occasion. That he would be on board with the mission of Christ. But no.

He later goes on to try to deny Jesus the right to wash his feet at the Last Supper. He goes on to try to fight the soldiers as they arrest Jesus, cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. He goes on to deny he knows Jesus three times, during the night before Jesus dies. It seems Peter never learns.

Yet Peter is the man who is credited, along with St Paul, with founding the church. To Catholics he is the first Pope.

Peter is certainly a complex character and it seems mystifying that Jesus chose him to play such a vital part in his own ministry and in what was to take place after the resurrection.

So, what do we know about Peter?

Well, we know he doesn't fit the job description I read at the start. He was no scholar. Even the two letters which bear his name are generally agreed not to have been written by him. The Gospel of Peter and Acts of Peter are both apocryphal and so not in the Bible as we know it. We have no first-hand account. But it seems the writer of Matthew had some insider knowledge about Peter, because it is in this Gospel he is described best. It is a warts-and-all image. He is hot tempered, impulsive and argumentative. He doesn't learn from his mistakes. He is a simple fisherman, not a diplomat, and although he must have been changed during his time with Jesus, he certainly never became a saint in his own lifetime. He fell out with St Paul, but then Paul probably wasn't an easy ally

for such a man. Paul would have matched that job description I read earlier much more closely than Peter. Yet, it was Peter who the risen Christ instructed to 'feed my sheep'.

It is believed that Peter died as his beloved friend and master did, on a cross. Perhaps in Rome, perhaps upside down. Tradition holds that the site of his burial is where St Peter's basilica stands, the altar marking his grave.

In 1950, human bones were found buried underneath that altar. Then in the 1960s, items from the excavations were re-examined, and the bones of a male person identified. A forensic examination found them to be from a male, aged about 61 years, from the 1st Century. This caused Pope Paul VI in 1968 to announce them most likely to be the relics of the Apostle Peter.

45 years later, Pope Francis revealed the nine bone fragments for the first time in public, during a Mass celebrated in St. Peter's Square. And on 2 July 2019, the Pope transferred the bones to the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew of Constantinople. Bartholomew, who serves as head of the Eastern Orthodox Christian church, described the gesture as "brave and bold."

It seems fitting that Peter's relics should be brave and bold and that even now he is busy trying to be the rock on which the church is built. Trying to unite a divided church. Two thousand years after his death he has become the widely travelled, tactful diplomat he never was in the Gospels.

What can you and I take from the life and example of Peter? It seems that God doesn't write job descriptions and wait for the perfect candidate to come along. Instead he can and does

recruit the ordinary, the unexpected, the seemingly flawed. I think that might be us.

Peter shows us that God will forgive us as we blunder about trying to understand what it is we believe, just as Jesus never gave up on Peter no matter how dense he was or how many mistakes he made.

The Gospels tell us that what God values isn't what we might expect. It seems Jesus loved Peter with all his flaws. He valued his good points - his passion and his loyalty. He got cross with Peter, but still he loved him. When Jesus rose from the dead, the first male disciple to see Jesus was, of course, the man who had denied him three times. Peter.

What we learn from Peter is that God can and will happily use any of us to bring his kingdom about. Because if Peter can do great things for God then perhaps so can we. The question is, what does that look like, for us?

Amen

