

# **Sermon on Sunday 29 June 2025**

## **by Rev. Scott Martin**

*Gospel: Matthew 16. 13-19*

Today in the Church calendar, we give thanks for the Christian witness of St Peter and St Paul.

One of the main reasons for joining the two together is that the 29<sup>th</sup> of June commemorates their martyrdom during the persecution, by the Roman emperor Nero in AD 64. This was the time of the great fire of Rome for which Christians got the blame! St Peter was crucified upside down in Nero's circus, and St Paul was beheaded, because as a Roman citizen he could not be crucified. Back in January we remembered St Paul's conversion, and so today our Gospel reading focuses on St Peter.

We join Jesus and his disciples as they come into the district of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus, having recently miraculously fed the crowds with the loaves and fishes, asks the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" He gets a mixed response of reports from the disciples; some people believe he is John the Baptist, others think he is the prophet Elijah and some Jeremiah. And then, of course, we reach that moment, which could almost be described as the crunch point for the disciples. Jesus asks them that penetrating

question: "But WHO do YOU say that I am? Who do you say that I am?"

If we press pause on that for a moment and think about the disciples' relationship with Christ throughout the Gospels, there's something quite striking and significant to notice and to take into consideration. And that is - and I, of course, say this with all respect - how slow the disciples were to catch on, in understanding who Jesus is! For example, they misunderstood the kind of leader Jesus was going to be and argued who would take pride of place in his Kingdom of political victory. They ran away at the arrest and crucifixion. They initially doubted Mary Magdalene's reports of the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus. And of course, on the road to Emmaus, they voiced their disappointment to the stranger, that Jesus had not been the one to redeem Israel as they had hoped for, unaware that they were speaking with the crucified and risen Lord!

So, when Peter responds to Jesus' question of, "Who do you say that I am?" with the words: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God", we get to see a rare moment of the revelation of Christ's identity, coming from the mouth of one of his disciples. And because of his messianic confession, Peter is called blessed by Jesus. He is also told that he is now Peter, the Rock upon which Christ will build his Church, the

one who will now hold the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The significant moment of revelation in all of this, is when Christ explains to Peter that he has not been able to make this confession, because flesh and blood has revealed the Truth to him. In other words - and this is something important to understand - it was not by physically seeing Jesus that Peter was able to call him the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It was NOT by seeing a man with brown eyes, beard, long hair, slightly crooked nose, 5 foot 6 inches in sandals, that Peter was able to make his confession. Jesus' identity as the Messiah was revealed to Peter by his Father in heaven.

And in many ways, this closes the historical gap between us and the disciples. The disciples were at no more of an advantage over us in understanding who Christ is, by physically being with him. Even when they saw him, listened to him, touched him, they still didn't fully understand. Flesh and blood were not enough. And the ongoing proof of this comes from Peter himself. After Peter makes his confession, Jesus informs the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and on the third day be raised. What was Peter's response to this idea? Did he say, "Go ahead, Lord, we'll be right behind you?" No, he took Jesus aside and said, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." The one who

had just been given the Keys to the Kingdom of heaven attempts to get between Christ and the cross! And because of this, poor Peter gets quite a stern rebuke from Jesus when he says, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block for me. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

And so, even after Peter's confession, he remains with the rest of the disciples in not fully understanding the kind of Messiah Jesus is. Peter, of course, went on to deny knowing Jesus three times during Christ's arrest and trial.

Here's a little thought experiment: Imagine if we all jumped into a time machine together and went back to join the disciples. Would we have been at an advantage over them in understanding Jesus? If it were possible to be with them BEFORE knowing anything about Jesus' resurrection, then we would be in a very similar position and level of understanding. We'd be at no more of an advantage by physically being there at the time.

And that is, I think, quite reassuring. It's reassuring because it means we today are in the same position as the disciples in continuing to learn who Jesus is. What do I mean by that? After the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, what did the early Christian communities have to hand, to make sense of the

significance of these events? What was opened and unveiled to them? They certainly didn't have St Paul's letters; they weren't written until at least 50 years after Jesus died. And they didn't have the written gospel either, the first of those, being Mark's gospel, wasn't written until 70 years later. So, how did they make sense of who Jesus was/is? What was it that revealed to St Paul after his conversion and the early Christian communities that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? Does anybody know or want to have a guess.....? It was the Scriptures, or as we sometimes "unhelpfully" call them, the "Old" Testament.

After the resurrection, in Luke's Gospel, the disappointed disciples were on the road to Emmaus when they encountered a stranger, who later revealed himself to be the risen Christ. Jesus did two things to help the confused disciples understand all that they had experienced. He unveiled the Scriptures to them, he showed them how the Old Testament, the story of salvation, foreshadowed the coming of the Christ into the world and how he had to suffer. That's why the Gospels are full of Old Testament imagery. Within the Old Testament, the New Testament was hidden/veiled; within the New Testament the Old is fulfilled. Jesus unveils the Scriptures as pointing to the one who is to come.

Before Abraham was... I AM.

The other thing Jesus did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus to reveal his identity was to break bread with them. And as soon as he did, their eyes were opened, and he disappeared...

Why? Because the disciples and, therefore, us, are now his body on earth. I said earlier that the disciples didn't have an advantage by being physically with Jesus during his time on earth; of course, it would be wonderful to have seen Jesus on earth. But what is a wonderful reminder for us here today and every time we come to worship together, is that we are with the first disciples. We are with them, because they did exactly as we are doing today to understand who Jesus is: We are meditating on his life and Passion in the light of the unveiled Scriptures together, Scriptures that reveal the coming of Christ and his identity, and we are breaking bread together, we are sharing in and are becoming, the body of Christ on earth.

"Blessed are you, Simon Son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church". And so, as we give thanks for Peter's witness and faith today, for his humanity, his vulnerability, his not understanding, and having his eyes opened, may we learn to see our own lives as a constant source of revelation. Because that is what we are; each one of us here today is an unfinished, unfolding narrative, journeying with the disciples,

having the Scriptures unveiled to us and meeting Christ by breaking bread together, that enables us to say with St Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Amen.