

Did you have a nickname in school? Or have you still got one? It's common isn't it to give or gain a nickname, usually based on a characteristic or something we've done, good or bad! Maybe you have a term of endearment for a loved one or your best friend. Turn to the person next to you and tell them your nickname ... don't panic I'm joking! My nickname in primary school was 'peanut', which only came about because we had a troupe of clowns come and talk about road safety and I was hauled to the front. One of the clowns stood behind me and said, "oh you're the size of a peanut," and thus it was born. As was my intense distrust and loathing of clowns! Nicknames, however much we love or loathe them do say something about us.

In today's gospel Jesus gives Peter a nickname, and from this nickname flows a controversy over the generations but also our understanding of who Jesus is, who we are and who the Church is.

Who is Jesus? That's where this passage starts. "Who do people say that I am?" Phew that's an easy question to answer, it's always easier to answer for other people, isn't it? "Some people are saying that ...". "I've heard people say ...". But Jesus asks straight out, what are people saying about me? Easy! Passed that one with flying colours, shall we carry on now? "What about you

though, who do you say that I am?" Oh sh...oot. Me? Well, that's an interesting question, I can probably answer it on multiple layers. Who am I? But here comes Peter to the rescue, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Matthew adds a bit to Mark's account here, it's important that Peter acknowledges Jesus' relationship to the Father. This is the Christological high point of the Gospel, what everything so far has built to, and what everything that follows flows from.

Who do you say that I am? We can't move any further on in our discipleship or our theology until we wrestle with that question. The Church couldn't move on for four centuries until they answered in the Creeds who Jesus is. It's why we confess the creed every single week, who Jesus is matters. It matters now, today, here in Berwick. Until we answer that we cannot move on as a parish. Who Jesus is sets the basis of how we connect with our community. Are we another social club? Another voluntary group? Another charity? Another business? Or are we a community of people who come together because in Jesus Christ we have found, or are finding, the way, the truth and the life?

Who do you say that I am? It is not until Peter answers that question that he gets his nickname. It is not until we can answer who Jesus is that we understand who we are. Jesus nicknames Peter, Rocky! In the Greek and the Aramaic, it is a clever word play, and knowing Peter's character as we do it is perfectly correct. He is a rocky character! It's also the most contested verse in the whole Bible probably, especially around the primacy of the Pope.

You are Rock, and on this rock, I will build my Church. Jesus, steeped in the Jewish Scripture, may well have had passages from those in mind. Isaiah admonishes Israel to "look to the rock from which you were dug" identifying Abraham and Sarah as the first rocks dug from the quarry of faithfulness (51:1-2). Peter becomes the rock upon which God will place other stones, living stones as the author of 1 Peter will call us (1 Peter 2:4-5) all built on Christ the corner-stone.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than argue about whether it is Peter or his confession or his faith which is the rock, look at Rocky! "The rock on which the Church was founded was not perfection, strength, or mastery but the undying capacity to turn afresh to

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<sup>1</sup> Hambrick, Stowe, Charles E, *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 3*, pp.383-384

face the compassionate gaze of God in weakness and sin. The rock on which the Church is built is the daring to trust – despite feelings – that one is yet worthy of being loved. The rock on which the church is built is the outpouring of this same compassion.”<sup>2</sup>

If St Paul had a nickname, it might have been bendy legs. Contemporary accounts describe him as short, bald, hook nosed, bow-legged with a mono-brow! Old bendy legs isn't quite as scary as his letters make him out to be.

Paul, murderer and bigot. Peter, denier and big mouth. The giants of our faith, the ones who break the final barrier and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Because it's not really about them, it's about who Jesus is. In realising who Jesus is we realise who we are or can be. We realise that we haven't got to be perfect, we haven't got to be wise theologians, we haven't got to be the most skilful apologists. We simply have to be us, ordinary human beings who usually get it wrong but who have found in Jesus Christ the means of forgiveness and grace to grow into the people God is calling us to be.

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<sup>2</sup> Chapman, Christopher, *Send My Roots Rain*, p.147

Which is exactly what the Church is. Pentecost as a time of ordination is also a time to celebrate the Church and remind ourselves that we are still being built on that rock. That's why we are an episcopal church as the CofE, we believe that it's important that those who are ordained stand in the line that stretches back to the Apostles and Evangelists, under bishops. Not because priests are super Christians but because "every priest is a 'Simon' learning to be a 'Peter' through their openness to be forgiven and made whole ... a priest is one who seeks to model what it is to be a human being open to God, through the grace of Christ and the communion of the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

Peter is given the keys to the kingdom, we have a depiction of it here in the window (very literal)! That's not about guarding and excluding, it's about releasing and empowering. When Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, and through Peter to us, the Church, he is "creating the Church as the epicentre of the Father's answer to Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom will come, that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.147

<sup>4</sup> Hambricke-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word*, p.384

This morning, we will con-celebrate the Eucharist, which means all those who are priests and have permission to officiate will gather round the altar and say the Eucharistic prayer. Not everyone is a fan of it, it can feel a bit weird sometimes. But it is a picture that reminds us that every one of us as Christians, as Rocky ourselves, stands round the altar to receive nourishment and be sent out to answer the prayer, your kingdom come! It is a reminder that we are all a royal priesthood, God's holy nation. A reminder that it is Jesus Christ himself who builds his church, which even death, humanity's greatest enemy, cannot defeat.

Nicknames. In the book the Acts of the Apostles we are told that those who began to follow Jesus in Antioch were given a new nickname, Christians! You and I already have a nickname, and like Peter one based on our relationship with Jesus. And whilst we as priests have a vocation and a responsibility to feed and serve the Church, all of us have a vocation to being feed and serve the world, to lead people to find the answer to the question of Jesus, "who do you say that I am?" All of us seen, known and loved by Jesus to be given our nickname, our own role in this thing that Jesus is building which is called the Church. And if we haven't quite discovered what it is yet then there's time and space to do that, come and have a chat. Or maybe we have discovered

what it is but we're not ready to step into it yet, come and have a chat. Or we tried it once and messed it up, come and have a chat.

If we are to be part of the answer of our prayer, 'your kingdom come, your will be done, in Berwick as it is in heaven,' then we have to know who Jesus is, and knowing that know who were and who we can be, and living into that become the Church that binds unforgiveness, hatred, and discord and releases forgiveness, grace, and life.

We already have a nickname, Christians, let us go and follow Christ to re-make the world in his image.

Amen