

Sermon Archive 577

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Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Lent 5

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Introduction: Holding and being held

"I believe in God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his son, our Lord; who was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and was buried. He descended into hell." Maybe you know the rest of the creed, which takes him from that low point, to better places.

It's easy to think of faith as adherence to a creed - affirmation of a statement, being properly orthodox in the way we describe our God. Here's another way of thinking about it. Faith is holding and being held.

God holds us. We hold one another. Sometimes maybe we even hold God.

In being held, we find the peace within which we can grow courage, love, good hearts. In holding one another we are true to what we were created to be - carers, nurturers, kaitiaki of dreams and hearts. And holding God, we are worshippers - those who are still and know that God is God. Holding, being held.

There is an image of the third rock from the sun. It's made of rock, but it's peopled with living things, plants, animals and people. Does it long to be held?

Well, although the hands to hold it are there, they need to come together. Otherwise, it's not a holding. It's a distant hand held as if in benediction. It's a beautiful thing - a benediction. But if the hands can come together, then faith can become holding and being held. The church can become a community of the holding and held - if the hands can come together . . .

We all have hands. Do we understand their purpose? A story of Peter beginning to understand - and the joy it gave to Jesus' heart.

Lesson: Matthew 16: 13-18

Reflection: Messiah!

Peter opens his mouth, and out comes this: "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". The words suggest that he's come to understand something vitally important: how God is present in the world - not absent, but present. Present in someone who is driven by love (maybe holding and being held). He has come to understand that the old promises of God have not been dissipating in the ether, but ripening on the shelf. He has come to understand that today life is different, for the kingdom is ready.

And Jesus thinks "ah, **this** is something upon which I can build the house of faith. This is something with deep foundation, strong enough on which to place the weights of faith, from which to launch the lightness of hope. This is something more helpfully rock-like than the passing parroting of "I believe in God the Father almighty". This is what **he**, the guide of the journey of faith, has been longing to see emerge from his people - something inspired, of the Spirit. So he calls Simon bar Jonh "Peter" - which means the rock. "You are Peter, the rock, and on you I will build the church - and nothing will prevail against it.

It's as if Jesus has found in Peter, in his understanding of how God is present, and what that means, the other hand that will come together with God's hand, to cradle and hold that third rock from the sun.

Called to hold and be held. God holding us. We holding one another in God's name. God being held in the worshipful mind and heart. Peter seems to have got it; and Jesus says "yes". At long last, a rock that's not getting in the way.

Hymn: Loving Spirit

Lesson: Matthew 16: 21-23

Reflection: Messiah?

Peter, the Rock, has used the word "Messiah" to describe Jesus. But it seems that he hasn't yet worked out what it means - what "Messiah" entails; because he seems to have in mind a Messiah who doesn't sacrifice self. He has in mind love, but love that admits limits - sensible, measured. And so the Messiah, who had thought "Ah, upon this something can be built", says instead "get behind me; you're getting in my way."

This year's Lenten theme, "Jesus and the stones" has been an exploration of the many of things that have got in the way of Jesus. And to a degree, it's been simple enough. In the way of Jesus was the mud that sticks and clings. Mud is bad, and needs to be gone. In the way of Jesus are the things that are fed by hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is bad, and needs to be gone. In the way of Jesus are the things fed by judgment. Judgment is bad, and needs to be gone. In the way of Jesus was the praying on the little ones. Praying on the little ones is bad, and needs to be gone. It's all quite obvious! Today, what gets in the way is a man saying that he hopes "Messiah" doesn't mean death and sacrifice, because his love for Jesus is real. Love is not bad. Love does not need to be gone. This stone is complicated.

When does love get in the way? A fairly famous Christian thinker suggested love gets in the way when it's not quite love - when there are threads of impatience running through it, when it is inhabited by arrogance or rudeness. When it insists on its own way, or can see a point when it will stop - I will love you only so far (shall we keep a useful record of wrongs?) If *this* is part of the texture of the thing that people are calling "love", then maybe we've passed into the realm of clanging gongs - things getting in the way of Jesus.

There is no law against love - but love is something that Jesus has yet fully to teach Peter the Rock - as he stands for us, the church, who would be the other hand, which with the hand of God cradles, holds the third rock from the sun.

Music for Reflection

Lesson: 1 Peter 2: 1-5

Reflection: Love and living stones

You ask me what I remember, and what I learned. Forgive the recollections of an old man now. The answer is that I remember so many things. I remember

him asking me if I loved him. I said "yes, Lord, I do". He asked me again - a second reply of "yes". The third time made me sad (echoes of other three fold events). I said "'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.'" And I did - and since then I have learned much from him about what it means to love - and how love never dies.

I also remember the time when I told him who I thought he was - and he was so pleased for me, and called me his rock, and promised me that he would build something wonderful on what I'd discovered - only then to tell me to get out of his way with my well-meaning love that was a stone in his path.

I remember these things - loving, failing to understand, being a fortress and a failure. Rocks can become stones in the way. Maybe that's the nature of "knowing in part", rather than "knowing fully", prophesying in part . . . before the complete comes. I can be forgiven for getting or wrong - partially . . . I **can**.

My word to you? Well, the obvious things! Cast away the stones of malice and guile - the insincerity, envy, and slander. These will weigh you down - they'll be stones in the way of others. That's hardly rocket science - the kind of thing that any half-pint preacher could plod through at Lent.

Here's something else - for those of you who might have been wondering about where God might find that other hand - to complete the holding, the cradling, the sheltering of that beautiful blue world.

Approach him as a living stone - yes, rejected by people, but precious to God. Maybe he'll be that high rock from which you can sing your new song. And present yourselves to him, to be other living stones, with which he can build a spiritual house - a shelter, a cradle, a place of holding and being held.

Ah, I suspect that this will feel strange to you. Maybe it's the kind of thing that will only make sense once the final stone is rolled away, and the church chants "crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he . . ."

-ooOoo-

Peter falls silent. Standing for us, he was a rock and a stone in the way. One week further into our Lenten journey, we are called to present ourselves to be living stones in something that is being built by Christ.

So we keep a moment of quiet.

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