



*Christ Church Cathedral*  
OXFORD

**23 August 2020: Sunday Worship**

**The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity**

**Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20**

**The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology  
'On Improbable Rocks'**

In our first reading from the prophet Isaiah we heard, “Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance, you who seek the Lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged” (51.1). And then in our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciple, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (16.18). Whoever designed the lectionary—or maybe it was just the Providence of God—invites us to reflect on the meaning of ‘rock’ in each of these readings and to consider what they do and don’t have in common.

Isaiah’s audience was the Jewish community that had been carted off to exile in Babylon, after Nebuchadnezzar had sacked Jerusalem in the year 597BC. Given the mention a few chapters earlier of King Cyrus of Persia, who conquered Babylon in the year 539BC, Isaiah was probably addressing the second generation of exiles. Nevertheless, it seems that they still mourned the loss of their homeland and yearned for the freedom to return. Hence the prophet’s opening sentence, “Hearken, you who pursue deliverance”.

Isaiah’s advice to the grieving, unsettled exiles is that they should “look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged”. And what might that be? The next verse gives the answer: “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you” (51.2a). If we stopped there, we might leave with the impression that Isaiah was merely exhorting the exiles to remember who they are, to identify themselves with their ethnic roots. We might mistake his words for an appeal to sheer national identity. But it isn’t, because Isaiah goes further and specifies the meaning of Abraham and Sarah: “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and made him many” (51.2).

Isaiah's exhortation to the exiled Jews is to remember that their very existence as a people owes everything to that fact that one, solitary man, Abraham, heeded God's call and entered voluntarily into exile, leaving behind his home in Ur of the Chaldees (was it urban and sophisticated?) and heading out west to an unknown destination. Yet, notwithstanding these highly unpromising beginnings, God blessed Abraham's courage and faith and made him the beginning of a new people.

So, says Isaiah to the Jews in Babylon, remember that exile can be a place to which God calls us, and that if we are faithful in it, it can be a place of great fruitfulness. Therefore, don't despair: "For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song" (51.3).

In our excerpt from the prophecy of Isaiah, then, the 'rock' signifies the faith of solitary Abraham in responding to God's call to enter into exile and to discover a new way of flourishing in it.

How does Jesus' naming of Peter compare to this? At first glance, it might seem quite different. Whereas in Isaiah 'the rock from which you were hewn' signifies origins, here it signifies solidity, reliability, steadfastness: "And I tell you, you are Peter [meaning 'rock' in Greek], and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it (16.18). Rock as solidity, not origins.

But there's more to it. There's a great irony about Jesus' naming Peter, because Peter was notoriously fickle, impetuously brave one moment, a treacherous coward the next. After all, it was Peter who denied Jesus three times after he had been arrested and before he was delivered to Pontius Pilate for judgement and eventual crucifixion. By natural character, Peter was a contradiction in terms, a rock in name only.

In effect, therefore, what Jesus is saying is that it is upon this most improbable basis that he will build his church, and that this church will prevail against all the powers of death. As Isaiah reminded the Jews in Babylon that it was out of Abraham, who was "but one", vulnerable, weak, that God built a whole nation; so Jesus implies that it is out of Peter, unreliable, fickle, weak that he will build his church.

Therefore, the good news of these two passages to us is this: first, exile may be exactly where God wants us; and second, human weakness—whether in numbers or of character—is no measure at all of what God’s power can do with it.

“For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song” (Isaiah 51.3).