

Sermon for the Patronal Festival of St Peters Church Palmerston North, Sunday June the 24th, 2020. +David Moxon

It is a great privilege and joy to be here today, to share in your patronal festival. I have a deep affection for this church because I grew up in Palmerston North, and saw the new concrete church we are in now shortly after it was built. My grandmother on my mother's side was a member here, and was on one of the fund-raising groups that helped pay for this building. Her name was Sybil Lancaster, and she belonged to a St Peter's parish fireside circle that also prayed for, and raised money for missions. She is remembered by a small metal plaque in a pew. She died in 1971. We also have St Peter himself in common, since he is your patron and was also the first bishop. Together we have much to receive from his example this morning

Peter was called to minister in the ways of the good shepherd. In the readings today, we see him shouldering the huge burdens of leadership with death defying courage and integrity while in prison in the Acts reading, we see him referring always to Christ the shepherd and guardian of our souls, in his first letter, and we see him being called to be a rock for the people in the gospel reading today: a sure and strong shepherd. Peter was also told to feed the lambs and the sheep in the name of Christ in John 21. We can use a shepherd's staff as an example of his ministry and mission.

I was given a 300-year-old shepherds staff in 1993. It had been used in West Stoke Sussex for over a hundred years by a family of shepherds, then it was passed onto successive generations of bishops to use as a sign of Christ the Good Shepherd. The bishop who confirmed me in 1965, in All Saints Church Palmerston North, when I was 14, was carrying it. His widow, Elizabeth Baines gave me the staff in 1993. Here it is. The staff of a good shepherd in Israel Palestine was used in at least five different ways.

Firstly, the staff gave guidance. The curve at the top of the staff could hold the back leg of a sheep to prevent it going in the wrong direction, and could guide the neck of lamb to keep it on the straight and narrow. Peter himself needed this kind of guidance in his own life many times. At one point he went AWOL at a crucial moment and could also lose his temper. He's like us.

Secondly the staff offered encouragement. By prodding the flock from behind with the other end of the staff, sheep were prompted to rise up and walk! Especially when they were lazy or inert. Peter needed this kind of challenge from Christ several times. So do we.

Thirdly the staff provided a toehold in the ground for the shepherd as he went up or down steep slopes. He kept his balance and could maneuver his way in rough country. Christ did

this kind of thing for Peter when he was in danger of drowning. We would stumble and fall even more than we do without this sense of balance.

Fourthly the staff gave a means of defense. By holding it horizontally the shepherd could fend off an attack from an animal or rustler. Peter as a bishop knew what this meant, as he moved the church through the Mediterranean and faced increasing persecution in Rome. We need our guardian and guide more often than not.

Lastly, in, away not so well known in the west, the staff was used by a shepherd to offer solidarity in darkness, or when danger seemed imminent. The sheep in the sheep fold were guarded by a living door. The shepherd would sleep across the entrance, and when a noise or a threat occurred, he would stretch out the staff across the backs of the flock, touching them lightly on their backs, to reassure them that he was there in the shadows and that he was their living defense. This is one of the traditions behind the much-loved words of Psalm 23. "Your rod and your staff are my comfort." Peter had also received this touch from the lord in his own darkness many times. This com-fort, meaning literally, 'to strengthen greatly', is the key to walking tall in the world.

As Paul said to Timothy while he Paul was in prison facing the possibility of execution. "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, and of power and of a sound mind." Peter and Paul lived out their last days together in Rome. Their God given strength saw them though and built a community that changed the Mediterranean forever.

This staff can be assembled in three pieces. Imagine the business end of this staff, the headpiece that has the iron curved hook on it, that part of the staff can represent the future, the pathways we choose to walk in. If you imagine the base end of the staff where the staff leaves its mark on the earth; that part of the staff can be seen as a sign of where we have been, of the past. When the two halves of the staff, the future and the past, are joined by a housing in the middle we have there in the middle a sign of the present. This is where the past flows into the future, the here and now; the present moment.

If you try and hold up the assembled staff horizontally with your open hand with a fulcrum at the ground end, in the past as it were, the staff will fall. There is no centre of gravity there, no balance. When we are drawn mainly to the past as the central point, the pivot of our lives, by regrets and guilt, or by nostalgia, there is no place of rest there.

If we try to place the fulcrum at the other end, in the future as it were, by holding the staff with our open hand, the staff will fall because there is no centre of gravity there either, no balance. So it is if we are drawn to the future for the central point of our lives by anxiety, timidity or wishful thinking. There is no rest there.

However, if we make the fulcrum in the middle of this staff, upheld with an open hand, in the present, there is a position of rest, of balance and of poise. You can balance the staff evenly and horizontally this way with your palm. There is a centre of gravity there. The staff doesn't fall to the ground; it achieves a measure of stability. This is part of what Jesus meant in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew chapter 11 verse 28:

Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

He meant that by abiding in the present moment, yoked with him shoulder to shoulder, in a kind of communion in the here-and-now, the past can be given over to God for holding, perhaps for some healing and redemption, certainly within God's care. In this sacred present with him the future can be handed over to God who is our only sure guide into tomorrow and who holds the future destiny of us all. In this way the time of stillness becomes a sacrament of the present moment.

This is an easy yoke, this is a divine embrace, this is a deeply interested companionship for you and with you and to you. This is not a heavy burden; this is a covering in the here and now of great warmth and solidarity. The touch of the Good Shepherd.

I came into this church once in 1974, when I was thinking about, but also troubled by, the call to ordination. I had an unforgettable conversation with the vicar, The Revd Tony Sutton. Like Peter, like us all, I felt unworthy and knew my own limitations only too well. After we talked, I knelt in my Grandmother's pew and prayed. as I breathed in I prayed "God of grace and truth", and as I breathed out "Come to me with your love." I did this 21 times and felt a kind of calm descend, of grace resting on me and my pilgrimage at a very difficult time. And then, having been in communion like that, I left this place the stronger for it. Interestingly, as soon as I finished, someone began to sing a beautiful solo for a rehearsal. I have never forgotten that and think of it whenever I drive past here.

If you commune in this kind of rest, you can walk away taller, clearer, calmer, with a measure of balance and peace that the world cannot give. Saint Francis of Assisi described the potential for wholeness that can come from prayer of this kind:

"Most high and glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me sound faith, firm hope and perfect love. Let me Lord, have the right feelings and knowledge, properly to carry out the task that you have given me."

We will sense this same communion deep inside us and between us when we make Eucharist together in a few minutes time. Christ comes to us in the sharing of bread and wine, deep inside our hearts; heart to heart. Christ comes to us in a love, that is closer than breathing and nearer than heartbeat. When you receive this divine love and life within you, you are transformed by the blessing of a meal which gifts a peace that is beyond words.

Christ is saying; ‘come and relax at my table, rest in this communion of grace; be strengthened together in your inner being; breathe the spirit in and out, I in you and you in me, in full communion with the God of all. Come with your heavy burdens and your weariness and I will give you rest’. You then rise up and walk forward in the company of the Good shepherd, as Peter did. You leave fed, nourished, and strengthened. This communion will see you through, both life and death; as it did for your patron saint.

My prayer is that we may all sense something of this grace, of this wisdom and of this rest, right where we are, right now. Be still and know. This experience has been described by the Jesuit paleologist and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as follows:

“To adore ... That means to lose oneself in the unfathomable, to plunge into the inexhaustible, to find peace in the incorruptible ... one becomes more deliberately conscious of oneself ... to give of one’s deepest to that whose depth has no end.”

Let Christ the good shepherd touch you with his staff of comfort, guidance, encouragement and toehold. Let Christ the Good Shepherd grant you a measure of poise and balance this day. You will receive a peace that the world cannot give. This was Peter’s secret in the face of his all too human weaknesses. It made him the rock of the early church.

Sir Walter Scott used this teaching of the rock of Peters’ faith very powerfully in his novel ‘Ivanhoe’, where Rebecca the real hero of the story says to her oppressor, “Thy resolution may fluctuate on the wild and changeable billows of human opinion, but mine is anchored on the rock of ages.” She meant that God in Christ is her sure foundation no matter what. This is your heritage here, this is your security and your hope. In Covid times like these, there is guidance and wisdom here that the world cannot give.