

# Advent Clergy Retreat 2017

## Address 2 – Bishop Richard



One of the ways in which I observe Advent is to spend some days with 8 colleagues, past and present - Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic - in the Monastery of Our Lady of Hynning (near Carnforth) where there is a community of Bernardine Cistercian sisters. We share their peace and prayer and we join with them in attentiveness to the Word of God through in daily offices.

Last year, one of our Catholic bishops thought we should go to Rome; no shortage of takers for that! We went in early October this year. Good Protestant bishops among us, notably +Cyril, said no visit would be complete without seeing the Pope. So, yes, on a Wednesday morning we joined thousands of pilgrims in St Peter's Square for the weekly Papal audience. Perhaps because we had followed in the slipstream of Archbishop Bernard, formerly of the Anglican province of Burundi and now ++Justin's representative to the Holy See, we ended up seated close to the Pope and spoke with him at the end of the audience.

Sitting there, right in front of St Peter's Church and gazing down on a square packed with the faithful, it was impossible not to be moved by the apparent visible victory of the Church over the world through the centuries. We may neither envy nor seek such glory. But there is a glory, which by any standards, is greater than this. Whether the numbers are great or small, whether the members are lowly or high, whether they are weak or strong, if they like Peter confess Christ, the victory is theirs through all eternity. Inscribed around the dome of the great Church of St Peter are the words: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church". A Church which Christ has built upon a rock is a Church against which the powers of hell shall not prevail.

Jesus promises his legacy of an everlasting Church in a strange place. He has taken his disciples, away from the Galilean lakeside, up north into the pagan world of Caesarea Philippi. The area was famous for the worship of the god Baal in ancient times. The Greeks said it was the birthplace of Pan, whose trademark pipes, it was said, could be heard in the nearby woods. The town itself was dominated by the gleaming white temple for the worship of Caesar. Herod's son Philip beautified the Temple and added his name to the town so that it became known as Caesarea Philippi.

Against this backdrop, Jesus poses the decisive question: "Who do the people say the Son of Man is?" And they said: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Opinion, opinion; one could multiply these opinions endlessly – they could (and were and are) multiplied endlessly, a great man, a hero, a powerful leader, an idealist, a religious genius... Opinions all of them, different views, but Christ will not build his church upon opinions.

And this is probably why it is in this unlikely setting that Jesus chooses to have this conversation. It was not in the presence of the multitude, it was far from the theologically-sound scribes, far from the litigious-minded Pharisees, and far from the fickle crowds. It was not where one might have expected the announcement. It was quite clear that his Church would not be built upon the learning of the scribes, the holiness of the priests, or upon the shifting sands of public opinion, but upon the small group of disciples that followed him. It was obvious that he did not consider Jerusalem, the city of the Temple and the heart of the nation, as the proper place to build his church.

"And who do you say that I am?" In this intimate encounter with Jesus there is no "perhaps" or "some-day" no longer an opinion, but the one answer which Peter gives: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Here is ebb and flow of human opinions, something quite new appears. Here God is named. Here the Eternal is expressed. Here the mystery is made known. Here there are no longer human opinions, but precisely the opposite.

Here is divine revelation and confession of faith. "Blessed are you, Simon 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 the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Peter's Church – that means the Church built on the rock, the Church of those confessing Christ – not the Church of opinions or ideas, but the Church of revelation. Not the Church which becomes what one or another says is this or that, but the Church in which the confession of Peter is said over and over again, repeated and passed down.

As we approach Advent, we should note that Jesus made this promise of his Church just before the announcement of his coming death. He means to have a Church built on a small group, a Church facing death. Death is the legacy of all who live. However, Jesus promises that "the power of hell shall not overcome you" The Church is built on the hard foundations of the valley of death with Christ as its life.

We can take comfort that the Church is the everlasting Church because Christ protects it. Its eternal nature is not visible in this world. It is persecuted by this world. The waves go over it and we may fear that it is sinking and about to be lost. But the victory lies with the Church because Christ its Lord is with it and he has conquered death. I John 5:5 asks us: "Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Whether the numbers are great or small, whether they are weak or strong, if they confess Christ it will always be. The Church remains only so long as it has a rock beneath it.

But Peter's Church – is that not something we can say with untroubled pride? Peter, the confessing, believing disciple, who on the same night that Judas betrayed his master, denied that he ever knew him as Jesus stood before the High Priest. Peter is the follower of little faith who sinks in the water on the lake. He is the

disciple to whom Jesus spoke those terrible words: "Get behind me Satan! you are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Peter is the one who, again and again, was weak, denying and failing, sometimes lacking courage, easily swayed by those he was with. Peter's Church, well, that is the Church to which all of us weaklings belong. This is the Church, our Church, which again and again, betrays and fails our Lord; we are the gathering of the unfaithful, the people of little faith, a frightened Church, which sets its mind "on human things". Advents calls us to set our mind "on divine things". Give strategies and plans a miss – and bring your people to the crib.

But remember, too, that Peter's Church is now also that of whom it is said: "He went out and wept bitterly." That is the difference. Peter went out and wept bitterly; Peter's Church can still weep. For in weeping we are finding our way back, to be back home, like the Prodigal son who falls to his knees, weeping.

This paradoxical Church, so founded on human weakness remains built on the rock, which is simply us confessing Christ. That rock is us, we who are that human mix of the fearful, faithless and of little faith, yet formed by God. It reminds us that no human hand builds the Church, but Christ alone. Whoever thinks they can build the Church is already destroying it, said Bonhoeffer for they are building a temple for idols, without knowing or wishing it. No human hands build the Church – we preach, we proclaim, we bear witness but Jesus builds.

We do not know Christ's plans. We do not see whether he builds or tears down. It may be that there are times, which by human standards are times of collapse but which are for Christ times of great building. It may be that times which, by human standards, are times of great success but which are for him times to tear down. We have only one true foundation, Jesus Christ – and by his grace alone we minister.

God loves us and has called us, and remains faithful. Only when we return to this fact – and this fact alone, can we be agents of transformation, reconciliation and forgiveness. Our mission is characterised by wounded-ness; a mission to a wounded world; a mission entrusted to a wounded Church; and a mission carried out by wounded disciples. The wounds of sin are our business. The wounds of Christ, even though we have caused them, are also our consolation and our strength.

The ways stories are told in the New Testament shows that God chooses people for authority precisely because they are sinners. Forgiveness of sin and commissioning go together. The Gospels portray Peter, the rock, as both leader and sinner. But not just the Gospels. In his letter to the Galatians Paul presents Peter as a coward and a compromiser and claims to have to confront him with the true demands of the Gospel. But at the same time, Paul admits Peter's authority.

Divine authority can only be recognised when those who bear it are recognisably sinners. If we remember that authority goes hand in hand with sinfulness, then it helps us to deal with the problems of projection and false dependency. It is not the

person who is sinless but rather the one who is sinful and forgiven who can mediate Christ's forgiveness. We need encouragement to be honest about our failings

Let us pay honest attention to our humanity, paying attention to being recognisably members of human race and remaining connected to it with honest recognition of our humanity. If you put learning theology before learning to be a human being, you will never know how to be pastoral, how to relate to people and how to be authentically the minister God has called you to be and keep faith to the rock that is Peter on whom our church is built.

Church is the place where all of us who struggle with the different and often competing sides of our personality can find grace and peace. I end with this prayer as we face the deep and personal questions about what it is to be human and honest about ourselves:

I am two persons;  
one is longing to serve you utterly, and one is afraid.  
O Lord, have compassion on me.

I am two persons;  
one will labour to the end, and one is already weary.  
O Lord have compassion on me.

I am two persons;  
one knows the suffering of the world, and one knows only my own.  
O Lord have compassion on me.

And may the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ fill my heart and the hearts of all people everywhere.  
Amen.