

Sermon at St John's, Cambridge - Sunday 23rd August

Revd. James Shakespeare

*'Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.'* (Romans 12.2)

It's official. GCSE and A Level results are out; Next weekend is the Bank Holiday; and in just over a week schools and colleges across Cambridge will be returning to work, at the start of a new term. Some of you may groan - as holidays draw to a close! – while others may be relieved by the encouragement of a regular routine. So I wonder, as we prepare for a new school year, what perspective our faith might bring us - what word of hope does God have for us?

Today's readings could not be more appropriate: for they're all about 'being transformed' and therefore equipped by God for what lies ahead. And in this process of being transformed there's an interplay between movement (being inwardly changed) and stability (the rock-like foundation on which we're anchored; which, as Peter discovers, is Christ). So if you've come to Church hoping to stay the same, then think again... God may have something in store for you, as he invites you to 'be transformed' and changed by Him! *'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.'*

So let's look at our 3 readings, before teasing out what being transformed by Christ really looks like and how it can happen; on the eve of this new school year...

Isaiah, our first reading, is full of encouragement, in this respect; because the prophet promises that God's salvation and deliverance (his word) will go out, as we look to him and the rock from which we were hewn: our inheritance of faith. Yes, blessing is in store for those who trust in him and follow his commandments; for God will *'comfort our waste places and make [our] wilderness like Eden, [our] desert like a garden of the Lord.'* I wonder where are the waste places in your life – the parts of your landscape that are parched and neglected – let alone the places in our world that are parched, in need of God's Spirit to cleanse and revive them?

Then in our Gospel reading, we're faced with a similar recourse to the language of rock-like foundations and abundant life, as God calls us – with the disciples – to be changed, and to go out as witnesses to his transforming Kingdom. It is one of those encounters that stands as a pivotal point at the heart of the Gospel. And one, therefore, with the potential to change us too, as we're re-directed along the paths that God invites us to follow...

Jesus is alone with his disciples, in the region of Caesarea Philippi, and he asks them *'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'* It could be seen as a test; but what emerges, in the dialogue that follows, is a critical point for them to recognise, at last, who Jesus really is. It's as if all those months of uncertainty pass, as the scales fall from their eyes and Simon utters the words, *'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.'* And this is where our language of rocks reappears, as Jesus says, *'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.'* Yes, Simon – as he recognises Jesus as the Christ – is given a new name, Peter, the rock. And through this confession of faith, he is to be the foundation on which the church will be built, upon Christ the living cornerstone.

What do we make of this? Surely not Peter, the loud-mouthed disciple, who's always putting his foot in it? But the point is, in the end, not Peter, but Christ; because Peter points us to Christ, the living rock on which we build. Our true foundation. Jesus is our rock; and Peter is rock-like only in so far as he points us back to Jesus. 'This then is to be our defining characteristic, our knowledge of Jesus Christ' and who he is: our Lord

and our God. Yes, this is the rock-like stability on which our hope – our call to transformation – rests. Like the wise man who listened to God and built his house on rock: it is through affirming who Jesus is, and living our lives rooted in Him, that we aspire to abundant life.

One of my favourite pastimes, on holiday, is collecting pebbles and rocks... for somehow, as I seek out my perfectly formed rock, I'm reminded (unconsciously) what really matters. And I've got some of my favourite pebbles here and somehow when I touch them or hold onto them in prayer, I'm drawn – like Peter – back to the rock-like foundation of faith: of all that is enduring and solid, held safe within the love of Jesus...

As Peter himself writes, later in the New Testament, in 1 Peter 2.4: *'Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...'* In other words it's not just Peter who is the rock, but all of us are living stones, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ himself.

So the first part of being transformed is discovering our rock-like foundation, in Christ and his words: as we discover that we too are part of him, living stones – just like those pebbles on the beach.....

And so let's turn, then, to our final reading from St Paul, who builds further on this foundation, when he shows us, more subtly, what's involved in living as disciples, being changed by Christ and equipped for what he calls us to do in the world. And we turn, again, to those amazing words at the start of Romans 12: Paul's manifesto for the Christian way. *'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.'*

So we've laid our foundation, which is Christ – recognising who Jesus is and trusting in Him. But what, then, of the change process that emerges from this? Well, very briefly, I want to pick out two aspects of Paul's teaching in Romans 12: simple tools that can help us, as we seek to grow as disciples and face the challenges and opportunities of the year ahead:

Firstly, in the previous verse, Paul invites us to offer our lives to God as a living sacrifice. *'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.'* In other words, it's only as we dare to give ourselves to him and become channels of his transforming love that we're really going to make a difference.

Secondly, in verse 2, Paul invites us not to be conformed to this world, but to *'be transformed by the renewing of our minds'*. And this is the crux of the matter. The rock is in place, we've offered our lives to Christ. But then there is the subtle process, day-by-day, of realigning our lives – not with the world's agenda – but with the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, and changing us, to be more like Christ.

For, in the end, it is God who changes us and who enables us, on the foundation of the rock of faith – through that daily process of self-giving and seeking to be aligned with Gospel values – to be equipped, to take his light out into the world. To love the loveless, to welcome the stranger, to reconcile the sinner, heal the broken and transform society, through his undying love... So may we be changed, open the doors of His Kingdom, and be found rooted in Him, Christ our living rock and foundation. *+In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*