

I pray that I may speak in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I guess many of us have been thinking of all those young people who have been experiencing uncertainty surrounding the recent exam results which comes on top of the problems of all those whose holiday travel plans have been impacted by the changes to the status of countries where quarantining is now required. Of course having Faith in God, who has our best interests at heart, will not ensure we have a trouble free life, for everybody has problems but the Holy Spirit is able to help us live out our faith with assurance that affects the way we think and the way we act.

It reminded me of the circumstances of my wife Isobel's A'Levels results, she caught glandular fever in her final year and didn't get the results she expected and needed. However the company she was being sponsored by helped her to get into Brunel University which is where we met back in 1976 and in 1977 she and I both graduated and got married. Since that time we have had many ups and downs but our Faith in God has enabled us to build our lives on a sure foundation.

Few of the Old Testament prophets refer to Abraham but our reading from Isaiah tells his story of divine blessing and the hope of descendants that are woven in with the faith that God would deliver his people and transform their desert filled existence back into one like in the Garden of Eden. We are asked to listen to God's word and think about the idea of being pieces of rock hewn from the same quarry and look at the example of Abraham and Sarah who despite their circumstances still had faith in the promises of God. Their faith was reckoned to them as righteousness even though it was over 2000 years before the life giving sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross and the same is true of our faith over 2000 years later.

God has been compared to being like a Rock and a place of safety and security which is reflected in that great hymn, Rock of Ages. Rock is amazing stuff and was formed in all different ways; hard like granite from volcanic areas or soft like

chalk formed on ancient sea beds but we have learnt that rock can be shaped and put to many uses from the early stone-age up to the present day.

The amazing flooring in our church is a sort of marble which reveals the many sea creatures that became fossilised, making each slab unique but all serving the same purpose, a durable, decorative surface that lets us use our building in many ways.

In our gospel reading we find that Jesus has been rejected by many in Israel including the Jewish leaders. Jesus was determined that this situation was not going to stop him building a new community who acknowledged his true identity and become the focus of God’s activity for the future. Jesus waits until they are back in Galilee, in the Gentile town of Caesarea Philippi. It’s here that he asks his disciples “Who do people say that I am?” Most of them say a prophet : identifying him with Elijah or John the Baptist, but Peter in a moment of divine inspiration confesses that he is more than a prophet. “You are the Christ the Son of God”. This statement is the fulfilment of the promises made to David in the Oracle of Nathan the Prophet and is the solid foundation for Peter’s Faith just as it is for us.

When Jesus says “You are Peter”, Jesus is revealing true identity. It is like when Abram changes his name to Abraham, the father of nations, and if Abraham the man of faith is the Rock that we are quarried from then Peter’s confession is the Rock on which the church is built. It’s the foundation of the community that Jesus was hoping for, establishing a new temple in the form of the church and a kingdom that will last forever although like Peter we might have the odd wobble.

So it’s a bit strange that Jesus doesn’t want his true identity getting out just yet. Perhaps because the Jews had the misguided concept of an exclusively national and political Messiah and Jesus didn’t want Peter’s confession to cause a revolution against Rome. What is key here is that the disciples know for sure that

Jesus was the Messiah foretold by Isaiah and Peter has been identified as the head of this new community of Faith.

This community had grown significantly by the time Paul was writing to the church in Rome. Chapter 12 of his letter marks a turning point from his conceptual discussions on righteousness to the practical and instructive out-workings like in his letters to the Corinthians, Philippians and Thessalonians.

It is one thing to write about walking in the Spirit but it's quite another to mark out the steps needed for such a journey. What does this new righteousness look like in practice? The most obvious response is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, become living stones as it were. He does not expect his readers to do this by themselves, but rather through allowing the Holy Spirit to equip them to live lives which are holy and acceptable to God. With renewed minds the Spirit helps us to seek and discern the will of God so we can put our beliefs and thoughts into action.

Paul is writing from Corinth so it is not surprising that he exhorts the believers in Rome to live with humility and Christian Unity as these are verses are similar to 1 Cor 12 but here the list of gifts are a little more every-day, gifts such as exhorting, generosity and compassion. The gifts here are not specifically linked to the activity of the Spirit but they are still important signs of the love of God at work in the lives of those who confess the name of Jesus and who are part of the body of Christ. The analogy of being the body with various members which are all essential helps Paul to focus on the idea of Unity within Diversity in Christ. This is fundamental to Paul's concept of Christian Unity in the church which was built on the Faith of those who witnessed the earthly life of Jesus the Son of God.

So this is why Paul urges us, in view of God's mercy, to be living sacrifices which was in stark contrast to the traditional dead animal sacrifices in the temple. Our spiritual act of worship is on the altar of our own hearts, it is not mere ritual but

something that involves our hearts, minds and wills. This process doesn't transform us in a single event but day by day as we learn to see and do God's will. It enables us to grow in Faith and become the living stones that the church needs.

This measure of faith is the power given to us by God to help the church function properly. As it is God given no one can adopt a superior attitude or be too self righteous. We are all called to share what we have in proportion to our faith and to do it with joy. As we start to come out of Lockdown, there will be many new opportunities to help of friends and neighbours through prayer and acts of kindness and learn how to become living stones Joyfully Serving Jesus here in Cuckfield. Amen. Words [1278]