**Matthew 16: 13-20**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that 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.’  He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’  Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’  And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son 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.  I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’  Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

We are all mothers of God, said Meister Eckhart in the thirteenth century, for God is always waiting to be born. I hope the relevance of that quote for each one of us will become clear.

The setting of the scene of this week’s gospel story, Caesarea Philippi, makes a political point: it was the site of an ancient sacred spring which emanated from the mouth of a cave where a shrine to the god Pan had been established. Herod the Great’s son, Philip, built a great complex of buildings there, designed to showcase Rome’s wealth and power. Hence the name Caesarea Philippi – because there was another Caesarea.

And this is the spot where Jesus is doing a bit of market research on the nature of his identity to the people around him. And in the background can be clearly seen niches in the rock face that contain little shrines to other gods worshipped by the local population.

So Jesus starts by asking the disciples what the people in general believe about him, and gets some fairly generic answers about prophets and so on. And then he homes in on the disciples themselves. That’s all very fine, but actually: who do YOU think I am?

And Peter says: you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And maybe he was speaking for all the disciples, but given what follows, when Jesus is clearly speaking only to Peter, more likely he was speaking only for himself when he made that confession.

So far, so good. But it can get a bit tricky round about here. This is one of the texts that has been used to establish Peter as the first bishop of Rome, and establish the line of apostolic succession from him. You are Peter, and on this Rock will I build my church.

There was a bishop of Liverpool, in fact the first Anglican bishop of Liverpool, right at the very end of the nineteenth century, called John Ryle, and my mother in law, whose maiden name was Ryle (spelled likewise R Y L E), has been trying for years to claim some family connection, which patently doesn’t exist.

Bishop Ryle is an interesting character though: he was the son of an MP, who was also a private banker; and young John’s life plan for himself revolved around becoming an MP himself. However, his father’s firm was bankrupted, which barred that route to him, so instead he became a priest in the Church of England.

Liverpool cathedral is, incidentally, the largest in Britain – I have sung in it and it is indeed vast - and at 189 metres long, is the longest church in the world, according to Wikipedia. It wasn’t built though until after Bishop Ryle’s death.

Bishop Ryle voiced the thought that the ‘rock’ on which Jesus was going to build his church was not in fact Peter himself – although the wordplay on Peter’s name clearly can lead us to believe that was what he meant. So yes, build the church on Peter to some extent, but much more, build the church on the faith statement that Peter has just volunteered. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Clearly, whichever interpretation you decide fits your thinking, Peter was being given a measure of authority by Jesus here. There’s that bit about binding and loosing, which grants Peter the power to interpret the Torah, the Jewish scripture, for this community.

But all of this just feels a bit like background information; and I was taught that the job of the preacher is to break open the gospel: to locate and then tell the Good News. So what is today’s Good News? It’s not just about who was to be in charge, or even the statement of faith on which the whole Church is based. In fact, it is probably in the bit we might have just skated over in the past.

Jesus says: on this rock I will build my church. And then: and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Now if we put ourselves back in that picture of the scene – with the caves as a backdrop, and the mountains beyond, we might start to see this shrine to Pan as the gate down into the bowels of the earth – the place into which sacrifices, maybe even human ones, were thrown. There is something ever so slightly sinister about this place.

But that aside, the ‘gates of hell’ was a common Jewish euphemism for death’s inevitable and irrevocable power. Jesus wants the disciples, and us, to know that Satan will not win out over the church; in a world of persecution and martyrdom, the church will be triumphant.

One of the basics we start with in confirmation preparation sessions is the church, not as building but as community, and I am grateful that this community gathered around this building here in South Weald understands the Church in this wider sense. But we have to be careful too not to mix up the Church with the Institution. So much of the church’s energy these days is directed, unhelpfully, towards institutional survival. It’s a natural-enough response to any passing-on of the baton: nobody wants it to collapse on our watch. However, remember that what we are witnessing is the shrinking of administrative structures, of buildings, maybe, of staffing structures. But none of those things is the Church.

All of those things have been the nice, and often useful, add-ons, which have helped the Church to do its work. They made life easier and more manageable. But that’s all. But the gates of hell will not prevail in our time either.

This gospel gives us the opportunity to think about that: the life and strength of the Church is not the administrative support; it’s not the Synods; it’s not people employed to train us; it’s not any of the other bits either. The life and strength of the Church is based entirely on who we think Jesus is. That Jesus is the Son of the living God. Our strength is vested solely in Him. So is our unity and community. So is our future.

And the point of Jesus, if I might put it like that, is love. One of the most succinct phrases in the whole of scripture for me is from the first letter of John: God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.

Jesus was incarnate – became human – to show humans where they had consistently gone wrong in the past. But more than that, Jesus came to show us what is possible. For the future. Because there is and always will be a future for the Church.

And what IS possible? Well, rather than succumb to the threat of disease, Jesus healed. Rather than abandon people to demons, Jesus showed compassion. Rather than let them starve because there wasn’t enough to go around, Jesus fed people who were hungry.

Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo and gives us reasons why we should do the same. If the life and death of Jesus proclaim how much God loves us, then the resurrection of Jesus proclaims that love is more powerful than hate and fear

and sickness and oppression

and discrimination and

and death itself.

That is the Good News. Love wins.

**Amen**