

Farewell Sermon St Peter and St Paul 29 June 2025

2 Timothy 4.6-8 Matthew 16.13-19

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Peter and St Paul. And no, it is not an accident that I chose this day for the final occasion on which I would preach and preside at the Church of St Peter and St Paul, here in the parish of Kingsbury, Baxterley with Hurley and Wood End, and Merevale with Bentley. It seemed a very suitable date, and not just because it is our patronal festival here at Kingsbury Church. The days on and around the 29th June are commonly known as “Petertide”, and is one of the traditional times of the year on which ordinations take place in the Church of England. One of the undoubted highlights of my time here was witnessing the ordination of Revd Carole, to the diaconate seven years ago, and as a priest exactly six years ago. Happy Anniversary Carole!

And so, as I come to the end of my time in public ministry and prepare to hang up my dog collar, it feels appropriate to look back to where it began, at Petertide thirty-six years ago, when Priscilla and I walked side by side out of the Church of Plympton St Mary in Devon, where we had just made our vows as deacons, prior to serving together as curates in the parish of, Southway, on the north edge of Plymouth. The occasion was strangely similar to the one five years earlier when we had made our marriage vows, and perhaps there is a parallel to be seen there.

“For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health”; those words from the marriage service are not part of the ordination vows, but maybe they should be. In ministry, as in marriage, nobody setting out on that adventure can ever know exactly what lies in store, and perhaps that is just as well. But as I look back on those thirty six years, I do so with a profound sense of gratitude for all the people alongside whom I have lived and worked and come to know along the way, and without whose love and support and patience I would never have made it this far.

But enough for now of the personal memories and reflections. This may be my last sermon, but it is still a sermon, and hence rooted (as I hope and trust all my sermons have been) in the Scriptures and in the message of good news that God has given to us in Christ. And so I turn to the Gospel reading set for today, the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, and in particular to these words of Jesus, spoken to Simon Peter: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”: but, oh my goodness, they will try! The gates of Hades, all the powers of the underworld, the armies of night, will do all that they can to undermine and destroy the church, this sign and instrument of God’s kingdom, but they will not prevail. Jesus warns us that all hell will be unleashed against the church, but he also promises that those powers will not prevail. The demonic forces will huff and will puff, but they will not blow this house down, because it is made of stone, not straw, and it is built on rock, not sand. It brings to my mind the image of

a lighthouse, constructed on a rocky outcrop on the edge of the ocean. No matter how fierce the storm, no matter how high or strong the waves that come crashing against it or even over it, the tower stands, and its light is not extinguished. “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

“On this rock I will build my church” – in interpreting this passage, we do need to be careful and clear about who and what this rock is. Although in St Matthew’s Gospel the promise made by Jesus is linked to his giving the nickname “Peter” or “rock” to Simon, only in a secondary sense at most is Simon Peter the rock on which the church is built. Simon’s nickname has more than a trace of irony; if Simon Peter is a rock, he is more sandstone than granite. It doesn’t take much for this rock to crumble – just a curious question in a night garden from the high priest’s servant, who has noticed his northern accent. If the church depends on the strength or reliability of its human leaders, even apostles like Peter or Paul, it has no chance of withstanding the storms and trials that will beset it. As we will be singing a little later, “The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord”. Jesus is our rock, and it is in him and him alone that we find our confidence and our security.

“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”; again, we need to be careful and clear about what those words do and do not promise. They should not lead us into an idle complacency or a glib triumphalism. It is not a promise that any individual church or even denomination will last forever. Many of the stones that surround us this morning have stood for a thousand years, but that is no guarantee that they will stand for another thousand, or even another hundred. There is no guarantee that the Church of England, as a national institution, will survive forever. All human structures have their time, and will eventually collapse or subside.

But the promise that Jesus makes is not about the buildings or institutions that we construct, but the Church that he builds and that is founded upon him. It is a promise that the purposes of God will not be thwarted by opposition, human or diabolical. It is a promise that the love and grace of God, seen in Jesus and reflected however imperfectly in the community of believers, will not be overcome by evil. It is a promise that our witness to God’s kingdom of justice, love and peace is not in vain; because this kingdom is built by Christ, and on Christ, and he and he alone is our true rock.

“On this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” I used earlier the image of a lighthouse, built on a foundation of solid rock, and able to withstand the most violent of storms. But here I have to be honest. In ministry, in discipleship, in life, it does not always feel as though we are at the top of a strong tower, secure against the worst that the wind and the waves can throw at us. Often, I suspect for many of us and certainly for myself, the image that resonates more strongly is that of the Gospel story in which Simon Peter and the other followers of Jesus are on a flimsy fishing vessel on the Sea of Galilee. A mighty storm has blown up, the boat is filling with water and in danger of sinking or capsizing. How can this fragile boat and these fragile lives prevail against such conditions?

The disciples' cry goes up, "Help, Lord! For we are perishing". They fear they are going under, and their fear is not without cause.

I expect most of you will know the end of the story. Jesus, who had been sleeping in the boat, wakes up, stands up, rebukes the winds and the waves, and there is a great calm. The storm is stilled, the boat does not sink, the disciples return safe and unharmed to the solid ground of the shore.

We misunderstand that ending if we think it is giving a glib message that, however bad things seem, it will all turn out okay. Jesus will save us from all danger, protect us from all threats, heal us from all ills, and generally give us immunity from the vicissitudes of life. Well, no. In the real world, we know that sometimes fishing boats do sink, terrible accidents and disasters do happen, lives are lost and people are hurt, and none of this through lack of faith. But the Gospel is not offering us pious platitudes and illusions but real and realistic hope. It is the hope expressed by the other saint we celebrate today, Saint Paul, who wrote in his letter to the Romans, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord", and therefore Saint Paul can say with confidence, "In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." In Jesus, the very gates of hell cannot and will not prevail.

Let me leave with you the words of another saint, one who meant a very great deal to both my daughter Debbie and wife Priscilla, the East Anglian anchorite who is known by the name of Julian of Norwich. In her reflections on the visions of Jesus that she experienced during a time of severe illness, Mother Julian declared, "He said not, 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be distressed. What he said was, 'Thou shalt not be overcome'".

Whatever storms may come, even when it seems that all hell is breaking loose in our lives, in our world, in our church, we have this promise. The gates of Hades will not prevail. You shall not be overcome.

Thanks be to God. Amen.