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Zechariah 4.1-6a, 10b-14, 2 Tim 4.6-8, 17-18 Ss. Peter and Paul  
Matthew 16.13-19 Greenwich, Sunday 30 June 2024



**..you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church...**

I would like to talk about foundations, about St Peter and St Paul, about Christopher Wren and about politicians laying bets about the election.

Thank you very much for inviting me here today. It is only the second time I have been here. The first was for Robert's licensing as Chaplain. I confess I spent a large chunk of that service trying (and failing) to work out the subject of the picture above the altar. I now know that it depicts St Paul's shipwreck on Malta, a theme that neatly combines the dedication of the Chapel to St Peter and St Paul, and its roots as a naval college, but which probably makes it all but unique among altar pieces.

The Naval College, as you know, was designed by Sir Christopher Wren and the Chapel at Emmanuel College, where I work and where Robert studied is similarly by Wren. Our Chapel is a much earlier work of Wren's. It is much less monumental than the Naval College but shares the symmetry, the proportion and the apparently effortless elegance that is characteristic of Wren's work.

And so to foundations. **On this rock I will build my church**, says Jesus. Peter and Paul are two of the foundational personalities of the Christian Church. Peter was the leader of the

12 apostles and these words are inscribed around in letters six feet high, around the dome of the enormous church in Rome that bears his name and was erected on the probably site of his burial. Paul came a little later to the Christian faith, being dramatically converted outside the gates of Damascus and turning from a career persecuting the followers of Jesus. If you look at the contents list of your New Testament you will see that Paul has more books attributed to him than any other person. Like Peter, he ended his days in Rome and there is a (slightly less enormous, and much less visited) church on the outskirts of Rome built over the traditional place of his burial.

**..you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church...** Except that we know that when it came to it, Peter was anything but a rock. Under pressure, the night before the crucifixion Peter crumpled. He denied that he even knew Jesus, not once, but three times. That is crucial to the way salvation works. We are not saved because we manage to get things right. We are saved because the things we do wrong are themselves taken up into God's transforming purposes and made right.

**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.** says Jesus. The Church, before it is anything else, is a community of forgiveness. On the cross Jesus becomes the victim of all our betrayals, all our jealousies, all our hatreds, all our violence, and by taking them all into the infinite love of God, ends them. The rock upon whom this community of forgiveness is built is himself part of the web of betrayal and violence, as we all are, and is delivered from it, as we all are.

These insights were laid out in the letters of St Paul. He explained in ways that have formed Christian thinking ever since, how it is that the death and resurrection of Christ transform existence. Paul talks about God's grace, about the way that we do *not* receive from God what we might earn or deserve, because God loves us and each person is of infinite worth to our loving creator.

These are the foundations of our faith and that is one of the ways in which we can say that the Church, the Christian community, is built on the foundation of the apostles. But the thing about foundations is that most of the time you don't see them. You take them for granted for as long as they are holding the structure up.

Which brings us to Christopher Wren. Both you, here in the College in Greenwich, and the community at Emmanuel College have the good fortune to live and worship in a built environment first had life in the imagination of Wren, and that remains true even if the interior of your Chapel here has been remodelled since Wren's day.

The space created by Wren at Emmanuel is generous and welcoming. It draws people in from the first time they set foot through the College entrance. It is not so big that a small gathering feels overwhelmed, nor so crowded as to control those moving in it. The proportions are soothing in their perfection and the decoration undemonstrative in its elegance.

But, and I am sure you find this here as well, once you start to inhabit a space like that you begin to take it for granted. You may be aware of feelings of balance and well being without analysing where they come from. The foundations that have been

laid, and the buildings that have been raised upon those foundations shape us and form us as we grow in ways that we are mostly unaware of.

That is true of the spaces that have been raised on the foundations laid by Peter and Paul. We take it for granted that in our daily struggle to lead good lives and to live well that we will require forgiveness and restoration when we acknowledge our failures. We assume that each person's life is of equal value and that the weakest are not thereby worth less, but by their infirmities are made *more* deserving of our concern and help. We know that living for ourselves only is a stunted and unrewarding form of human life. But these things are part of the building, the moral structure, erected on the foundations laid by Peter and Paul. It could be otherwise. There are many buildings differently proportioned from those designed by Wren. Famously, classical, Greek and Roman, societies did not think that each person was worthy of equal respect and value. Unwanted children could be exposed on hillsides. The totalitarian ideologies of the last century lauded power for its own sake, the strong would survive and the weak perish and that was just the order of things.

The moral environment that we inhabit, and largely take for granted, is the one that is founded on the witness and values of Peter and Paul and took shape in the Christian Church.

But these are not foundations that we can take for granted any longer. The influence of the visible parts of the Christian community is waning, even as people continue to inhabit the moral spaces it has created, largely without acknowledgement or reflection. Moral precepts that we might previously have taken for granted are increasingly challenged, in part because they have

become unattached from the foundations upon which they rested.

And so we come to politicians placing bets on the election. The charge is that a number of people (exactly how many remains unclear) have used privileged knowledge to make bets. It is not the size of the amounts involved that has shocked, it is what this reveals about attitudes at the heart of our government. Who would casually betray the trust placed in them for such shabby (and small) gain? It seems to speak of an attitude that things don't matter if no-one is watching. It is getting away with it that matters, not whether it is right.

This is, of course, only the latest scandal about standards in public life. I am sure you can all come up with your own list of the things that have disgusted you about the way those in power have behaved in recent years. The Principal of Brasenose College Oxford, a lawyer and KC, has published a book about standards in public life entitled *The Downward Spiral*. We clearly have a problem.

I am not as naïve as to suggest that the answer is simply to turn the clock back to some imagined golden age when the Christian Church had more power. Over-powerful religious institutions generate hypocrisy, as we know from Jesus' dealings with the Pharisees and Priests in the gospels. And that is before we get to the many dreadful things done in the name of religion down the centuries.

No, the lesson I think is that we need to remind ourselves of what the foundations are and who constructed the space we inhabit. We need to remind ourselves *that* morality matters and *why* it matters. We need to keep in good repair the Christian

foundations that each of us matters equally to god and that the less fortunate are not thereby of less worth.

Paul explained that we are not just followers of Jesus, as fans of a rockstar or disciples of a great teacher, we are members of his *body*. We become members of the body in our baptism when we *die* with him in order to be *raised* with him. In a chaotic, conflicted and cruel world this remains the treasure inside the structure raised upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets.

**upon this rock, I will build my church...**