**With the drawing of this Love and the Voice of this Calling…**

Sermon preached at the first celebration of Eucharist by Rev’d Juanita Hawthorne

3rd July 2022

*+In Nomine*

Ordinations have, for centuries mostly taken place at Petertide, the period closest to the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul. I wonder if anyone has actually considered why or is it just accepted as part of Church ‘tradition’? When I preached last week on priesthood I made it clear that everything we do liturgically has a reason and a meaning. It’s not just some random individual choice made by some random bishop or priest. As Christians we take seriously that which has been handed down to us over the centuries, most especially Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Church which has been shaped after the pattern of Jesus Christ from the very beginning and has grown with the insights given by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the leaders and Councils of the Church over time.

I’ve chosen to read the Gospel set for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul today because it tells us something of the faith of St Peter and the leadership role that Jesus conferred on him and also handed down, through Peter and the other apostles to all who have been called as apostolic leaders in the Church down the centuries. Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That was a bold – perhaps even a reckless statement – one that nobody else dared to articulate. Peter saw something in Jesus which he knew instinctively marked him off from any of the great prophets who had preceded him. And Jesus’ response was to confer on Peter a unique role of leadership – his ‘nickname’ – Petrus, Cephas meaning Rock – was used to cement Peter’s leadership as the foundation upon which the Church would be built. A huge commission which furthermore placed Peter as the one whom Jesus chose to unlock the Kingdom of Heaven to enable humankind to live in God’s presence. Wow.

So who was this ‘Rock’ that Jesus put so much trust in? During this last week Juanita shared with me a wonderful reflection on St Peter, some of which I share here and you’ll see in a bit how it relates to ordination, priesthood and what priestly leadership in God’s Church is actually about.

The reflection begins with these words: “I do so love St Peter…whenever he opens his mouth he puts his foot in it”. Despite Peter getting it spectacularly right in this morning’s Gospel, the Peter portrayed in the Gospels at large is a kind of anti-hero, albeit with flashes of insight. Yes, he does make the first profession of faith as we just heard but just a verse or two later he blots his copybook to such an extent that Jesus growls at him “Get behind me, Satan”. Peter argues with Jesus about having his feet washed, he impetuously declares his absolute readiness to die for Jesus, only to deny knowing him hours later when the chips are down. In other words, Peter isn’t particularly reliable – he’s a crumbly rock in so many ways. Yet Jesus, post resurrection, charges Peter with the commission, “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep”, a second call to costly leadership which will result in Peter, as an old man, being bound and led to his death on a Roman hillside.

So the ‘rock’ on which the Church is built isn’t an all wise, all knowing hero. Thank God for that! For if he had been that ‘perfect’ then the Church would never, could never accommodate the likes of you and I in all our frail, sinful humanity. We are reminded in St Peter that Jesus calls ordinary people into His service. Peter had a lot to learn, he had to ‘grow into’ his leadership role. He still didn’t always get it right as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles and St Paul’s letters. But he was gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to preach Christ Crucified so powerfully that thousands of people were immediately converted and the Church was born. Or as Juanita’s reflection says:

*It was grace that gave the coward courage to bear witness when it counted, grace that gave the fool the wisdom he needed to set the infant Church on her way, grace that taught the impetuous man patience and forebearance*.

We see then that the ‘Rock’ upon which Jesus founded His Church was simply then a human being totally dependent on God’s grace to grow into that significant leadership role, steering the early Church through many a conflict, often getting embroiled in arguments with that other impetuous leader dramatically chosen by Jesus on the Damascus Road, St Paul and yet somehow, by the operation of the Holy Spirit and Grace, drawing people of all nations and creeds to the love of God made manifest in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

But how does all this relate to modern day priesthood? The Church’s tradition holds that the twelve apostles, under the leadership of St Peter were the first ‘bishops’ – the Greek word episcopus meaning one who has ‘oversight’. They added Matthias to their number, we’re told in Acts by the laying on of hands. As the church grew, Deacons were appointed – again through the laying on of hands – for the specific task of serving the growing Christian communities in practical ways. Later by the 3rd century presbyters or elders were ordained to serve the church at the celebration of the Eucharist. They were set aside also by the laying on of hands to absolve, consecrate and bless – the three sacramental actions at the heart of the Eucharist, which was by then firmly established as the principal form of Christian worship. So we have the tradition that continues to the present day of priests sharing in the cure of souls, sharing in the Bishop’s oversight of the Church in a particular place and time.

Yet let’s not forget the fallibility of not only St Peter, but the other apostles too – impetuous, often judgmental Paul, the ambitious Sons of Thunder. They were not chosen for their perfection – but they were chosen for their openness to the Grace of God, drawing them deep into His love and giving them the ears to listen to the Voice of His calling. Down the ages, God has continued to call fallible people into this ministry of leadership and gives them the same grace gifted to those first apostles.

So yesterday, at Ely Cathedral and across not only this country but across the Christian world, the ancient ceremony of the laying on of hands, set Juanita and many others who have responded with joy and obedience to the Voice of God’s calling to follow in the footsteps of Peter the Rock and his companions, to feed the Lord’s lambs and tend His sheep. It is a serious and sacred commission, for the people of God - that great ‘treasure of the Church’ – is placed in their hands and they share in St Peter’s apostolic mission to set people free from all that impedes them from following Christ and to unlock the gates of heaven for all those many ‘lambs and sheep’ entrusted to their charge. It's an awesome responsibility, as you well know Juanita. In that poem that has God’s grace at its heart, Little Gidding, Eliot speaks of *a condition of complete simplicity costing nothing less than everything*. That is probably the most accurate description of the life and work of a priest that I’ve ever come across. St Peter, St Paul, indeed all the Apostles and countless others since learned this as they shed their blood for the Christ, the Son of the Living God. As priests, through the drawing of Christ’s love and the Voice of His calling [to paraphrase Eliot], we are called to a life of sacrificial service as we come before God quoting Michael Ramsey “with our people on our hearts”. Yet like Peter, we too are fallible and we too fail. But the priestly life, underpinned by prayer and the sacraments at which we are privileged to preside, is strengthened and nourished by praying daily for that increase in God’s grace that brings great joy because we know that we are called and drawn into this amazing vocation by nothing less than the Love of Christ.

So, Juanita, what a joy it is for you to preside this morning at God’s altar for the very first time. Cherish the moment. I pray fervently that you will always hold the joy of this calling close to your heart no matter what inevitable challenges and trials await. Know that you walk in the footsteps of that crumbly rock, Peter, who by God’s grace and openness to the operation of the Holy Spirit, led the infant church through all its conflicts and questions into the universal Body of Christ. As a priest, you are part of Christ’s universal mission in this place. So… bless and feed all those whom Christ has committed and will commit to your care with the Living Word and the Bread of Heaven.