

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

On This Rock

I wonder what the truth is about the story in today's, and next week's, Gospels. It's very much one story, and may once have been more clearly so. Jesus asks what people are saying about him (which in itself is strange: usually he seems not to care at all); the disciples tell him: people link him with prophets, and John the Baptist. What do *they* think? Peter says: *You are the Christ*, adding (in Matthew) *the Son of the living God*. In Mark this brings on them the command not to speak about him to others; but here it elicits wonderful words from Jesus to Peter: he is blessed, because it is by God's direct revelation that he can say these things of Jesus; on him the Church will be built, with power over hell, the keys of heaven, and the power to bind and to loose...*but Jesus still enjoins silence on them.*

After The Ladder, A Snake

Next week we go on to the sequel: that Jesus begins to teach them about the Cross. Peter, no doubt emboldened by his dizzy rise in the blessedness stakes, decides that we don't want any of that sort of talk. He will find a different way forward, he will save Jesus from such a fate. Having thus appointed himself saviour of the Saviour, he goes even further, and calls God the Father to help him: *Heaven preserve you!* - he says - *this must not happen to you.* In these few words, Peter speaks for all of us. The last thing we could want is the Cross; it is the worst. But Peter has stepped on a mine, and it duly explodes: *Get behind me, Satan! Stumbling-block! The way you are thinking is not God's way, but man's.* So much for the divine revelation, the beatitude, the Rock on whom the Church is built: *Satan*, and *stumbling-block*; how are the mighty fallen!

Silence

What does the silence mean, that Jesus demands of the Twelve? It certainly means obedience, and not presuming to pass judgment on Jesus' way until he has completed his journey. They may call him *Christ*, but that will not mean much unless they understand the Cross. But they can't. All four Gospels have Jesus *predicting* the

Passion; but the fact remains that, when it happens, *the disciples don't understand*. If they had, they wouldn't have scattered, and they wouldn't have been so utterly devastated. Some scholars think that, originally, the story was that Peter says *You are the Christ!* and *because* he thinks that's grand, and holy, and royal, Jesus *then* tells him he is Satan, and not thinking like God. Peter will never understand this; even in Gethsemane he is ready to draw his sword to defend Jesus; and as he sees him going unresisting to his death, he truly says: *I do not know the man.*

Rock-hard

So here is Peter, "the Rock" - practically unteachable, stubborn as a mule, and comprehensively falling short of his own standards, let alone those of the one he calls "the Christ". Surely there must have been humour in Jesus' choice of the nickname. But great love too. Jesus doesn't ask him to change himself: he knows he can't. But Jesus can, and will, use him with all his faults. He's a sinful man, but Jesus says: *Don't be afraid.* He's just a fisherman; but Jesus says *I will make you a fisher of people.* He denies Jesus, he evades the Cross: but Jesus says: *You will stretch out your hands. And someone else will take you where you refused to go.* With these words he indicated the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God. Then he said: *Follow me.* We would far rather see our following of Jesus as something dignified, sensible, life-enhancing. This may not, however, be thinking in God's way. Our very best human ideas will always be less wonderful than the mind of God.

Peter's Silence

Peter will go on to keep a sort of silence, consisting of the determination never to talk about this subject again. Most of our relationships are impeded by a resolve to steer clear of some point of disagreement, rather than imperil the friendship. But it won't work in this case. To be a friend of Jesus, we are obliged at last to have it out in the open, because unless we take up the Cross, we cannot come with him. *Fr Philip*