

The words of Peter must be before us always, because they contain a great and enduring truth which we need to remember constantly. If you go into St Peter's in Rome, you will find the first of Jesus' speeches today inscribed around the entablature of the dome: *Tu es Petrus... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the underworld shall never prevail against it.* They're actually preceded in the Gospel by Peter's personal Beatitude: *Blessed are you, Simon...because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.* Peter was not slow to believe himself specially privileged, and we know from many other places in the Gospel that he used the privilege, and to some extent felt its burdens of leadership.

To know that you are in the company of the Messiah and the Son of God, to know that you have his confidence and that he has a special rôle for you in the coming of his reign on earth, is however not a sure guarantee of favour or holiness; the building of that dome in the Vatican was the occasion which sparked off the Protestant reformation and has divided Christ's Church in Europe for half a millennium; because it was the bold and abusive sale of indulgences in Northern Europe that financed the building and provoked the horror of Luther with its last straw. For Peter too, the confidence he drew from Jesus' words to him overbalanced him; and when the Lord confides to him the true nature of his Messiahship - and this is the first plain announcement of the Crucifixion to come - Peter has the audacity to contradict his Master - even, ironically, wrapping his rashness in a celestial envelope: *Heaven preserve you, Lord!* - he is invoking his own hotline to the revealing Father against the wisdom of the Son of God himself. His punishment is the most extreme word Jesus speaks to any earthly opponent: *Get behind me Satan!*

These are not words that adorn any part of the entablature of St Peter's, outside or in; but they are for all that the words of Christ to his chosen lieutenant, and if they were addressed to Peter - and thank heavens the Gospel has the magnificence to preserve them to us - then they can be addressed to any one of his successors. I would like to see them placed in some prominent place - perhaps in that spot where the Pope's eyes rest, fifty feet above the heads of the congregation, on the end wall of the Church when he is preaching to them. They are spoken to all of us when we dare to contradict the Cross that comes to us, when we in our very praying try to deflect the will of the Father from leading us to sacrifice and to his mysterious sanctification, the emptying out of our life in love. If we should have our prayer granted, we shall find a bitter gift, and never know the fulfilment that lies hidden in the promise: *Deep within them I plant my Law, writing it on their hearts; then they will be my people, and I will be their God...and they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest - it is the Lord who speaks.*