

A new name

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Reverend Rebecca Newland
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Once upon a time I was a Roman Catholic and I thought that the Catholic Church really was the one true church. That belief was based on doctrine, teaching I'd been given. The foundation of that teaching are these verse we heard today. When Simon Peter says to Jesus. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus answered him. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father, in heaven. And tell you, you are Peter. and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." This was the text that seemed to give authority to the successors of Peter, a claim, made by the successive Bishops of Rome. It was claim that reached its zenith at Vatican I with the crafting of the doctrine of papal infallibility.

It is interesting to me now that my belief about the Roman Catholic church was based on a doctrine, a teaching that I accepted as true, whereas faith, the type of faith that transforms lives, that provides hope, freedom. strength and power comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. It was when I got into a relationship with Jesus that I recognized the difference between doctrine and faith. Faith is a whole other journey. It is that journey that Peter takes and by doing so sets up a chain. a link. that is so much more than disputes about doctrine.

It all begins when Peter becomes the first person to make the great Christian Confession of faith. He names Jesus as the Messiah, the hope of Israel, the son of the one who created heaven and earth. Before Peter sees this, the Gospels say that the demons knew who Jesus was and God knew who Jesus was. Now, Jesus is beginning to be known by people—and something new is happening, something new is being built—by the will of God, and by the power of God. The very first thing that happens is Simon is given a new name. And "Peter" really is a new name—there is absolutely no record of anyone using *Petros*, the Greek word that means "rock," or *Cephas*, the same word in Aramaic, as a proper name before this event.

In spite of movies to the contrary, Peter really was Rocky I, the first person to have that name. In the Hebrew mind names and naming were very important. A name was the summary of the existence of the thing named. To change a person's name—as God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Jacob's name to Israel—was to alter fundamentally that person's identity, relationships, and mission. To give a person his or her name was, in some way to shape their destiny. It still works that way: to confess Jesus as the Christ is to be changed, it is to be given, by him, a new name. It is to be given identity and mission in relationship to Jesus. That was acted out visibly with Peter—it continues to be true among us.

Part of the identity we receive from the Lord, is the same as Peter's. He is Rocky I, the first rock of the edifice, the church that Christ is building. We are, in this respect, like movie sequels. You are Rocky 5 billion or whatever—same director, same plot, larger cast. We continue to be called to be who Peter was called to be. Through us, and by us, Christ continues to build his church. Through us, Christ continues to be present to his world. This church that the Lord began with Peter and that we are a part of. is a holy and a sacred thing. It is not merely or mainly a voluntary association of like-minded people; it is not primarily or at its heart a human institution. It is instead a divine mystery, a holy thing, much greater than we can see, or imagine. larger than any denominational boundaries and doctrinal disputes—it is stronger even than death itself, vast in space and time. As we look at the church it may not look like that is the case — I mean what a mess it is sometimes — but as someone said to me only recently, "Only the fact that Christ himself builds and sustains the church can account for it still being here — it is a complete miracle!"

I have had an experience of the miracle of the church and the miracle of faith just recently. As many of you would know, have just had to go to Newcastle for the funeral of my brother-in-law Toby. I was with Jen and my mum most of the week and I did the funeral service. There were over 150 people there. family and friends included and I did not know how on earth I was going to get through the week. I put my trust in God and surrendered to his care. I knew too that many people in the church here were praying for me. Right from the start somehow I felt upheld by literally legions of angels and the power of God.

There is something beautiful and sustaining about this fallible thing we call the church. It is built of stones, or rocks; and these stones are laid one atop the other. They touch, so the building is a single structure that continues through space and time. That continuity is a continuity of Christ's presence, a continuity of faith, a continuity of tradition and doctrine, and a continuity of persons—each connected to those who went before. And that continuity is important. We call it "Apostolicity." It is one of the four marks of the church—in the Nicene Creed we say that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Apostolic Succession of our bishops—the fact that our bishops are part of a virtually unbroken line beginning with Peter and the others is one important part of this Apostolicity—it is one important way we are connected to the Apostles and the early church. But Apostolicity also means that the rocks are laid one on top of the other. Each new name, each new rock, builds on something unbroken and continuous. Jesus says to each of us, you are Peter, you are Rocky, Rocky five billion—or whatever.

There is a wonderful image for this. Think of the last 2,000 years as rings of time, as concentric circles of time, scores and scores of such circles. We are in the very outermost circle, farthest away from the centre—and at the centre is a Cross.

We are brought into the circle, into the faith, in large part because somewhere. Somehow, someone in the circle just before ours took us by the hand, and said, "come," and so drew us in. That is one very important reason why we are here. That person was able to do this for us because someone had taken him or her by the hand and had drawn that person in. And so on, through all the centuries, hands are held through all of those circles. Until we reach the place where a very few of those hands were held by hands touched by the mark of nails. So we hold hands touched by nails.

In this way, Christ builds his church. No one can create another church. Christ's church can be built on no other foundation, with no other living stones than those he names, and with no other cornerstone and chief builder than Christ himself. We constantly re-live this Gospel story. As we say to Jesus, "You are the Christ," he says to us—to each of us—"you, too, are Peter, you too are a rock and with you, also, I am building my church." What happened to Peter continues and it includes us.

One more thing: Jesus called Peter blessed, fortunate, happy. Remember what that blessedness looked like. Remember Peter's life of poverty and struggle, of pain and of conflict and, finally, of a martyr's death. That's part of what Jesus meant by blessed.

To be given a new name by Jesus, to have a Christian name, this always includes being named as servant, as minister, as one who gives one's self, and so becomes a gift to the world in the name of Christ. To be chosen, to be called, to be named as part of the glorious company of Christ's church, to be another Rocky, this is never done as a sign of privilege, but always as a mark for service; never for ourselves alone, but always for others.