

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**St Mark's District VI – New Undercroft**  
**21 June 2008**

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Neh 2:11-20a  
1 Pet 2:4-9  
Mt 16:13-20

May I speak in the name of God, our Rock and our Refuge, who calls us to be the living stones of his holy temple.

Dear people of St Mark's, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let me say again what a great joy it is to be with you today and join your celebrations.

Preparing to come here today, I have been struck by the remarkable story of St Mark's, and how, thanks to the covenant faithfulness of God, you have overcome so many different threats and challenges.

Today you are still here – a shining beacon at the heart of District Six; a guiding light at the base of Table Mountain; standing firm on the bed-rock at its foot.

Scripture has a lot to say about rocks and mountains.

At Mount Sinai, Moses met God and received the ten commandments.

And Jerusalem itself is a city on a high hill, the city of Mount Zion.

Mountains are often a place for encountering God.

But we must not put our trust in mountains, even ones as wonderful as ours!

For even mountains may tremble and be shaken.

It must have felt as though Table Mountain itself was struck by an earthquake, when the Group Areas Act forcibly removed the population of District Six, and destroyed homes and buildings.

It must have felt like life was again being shaken when plans for the Technikon included the destruction of St Mark's.

Even the City Council notice that St Mark's would have to be closed if the collapsed north wall was not dealt with, must have sent tremors through you all.

But as the Psalmist says, 'God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, and though the mountains are shaken into the midst of the sea' (Ps 46:1-2).

Well, this afternoon, I am trusting that Table Mountain will not suddenly collapse into Camps Bay, and that the new foundations and undercroft here are solid and reliable.

But my trust in the Lord is even more certain, even more solid!

For, as Jesus told us in a famous parable – it is far wiser to build upon rock than on sand.

But the point that Jesus was making is, of course, not only about physical building upon physical rock, but spiritual building on spiritual rock.

This rock is the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah – he is the Lord of all creation. He is the one who has overcome the power of sin and death. He is the one who was raised in triumph, and now sits at the Father's right hand in glory!

This is the firm foundation on which to build!

This is what our Gospel reading tells us.

Jesus has been travelling through Galilee, teaching and preaching about the kingdom of God.

He asks his disciples what the crowds who have heard him speak, make of him.

'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

Yes, they say, you are recognised as a holy man – another John the Baptist, or one of the prophets.

But it is not enough to recognise Jesus as merely a holy man – a good example for us to follow.

Someone who is merely holy cannot overcome death and evil. A good example cannot take away the sins of the world. Even a prophet cannot cleanse and heal us from our own failings, our sinfulness, our guilt, and set us free in newness of life.

The question that Jesus then asks his followers is the same one he asks each of us today:

'Who do YOU say I am?'

Who do YOU say that Jesus is?

Quick as a flash Peter has an answer.

'You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

You, says Peter to Jesus, you are the anointed one, set apart by God, and especially called, to be the fulfilment of the deliverance that God has promised to his people for centuries. All God's promises are going to come true in you.

'Blessed are you' says Jesus!

You are indeed Peter, Petros – which means Rocky (though please don't think of Sylvester Stallone!)

Jesus says, You are Petros, and on this petra, on this rock, I will build my church!

And we can understand Jesus' pun in two ways!

First, the church is built on Peter himself – for, as St Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 19 and 20, we 'are fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.'

But we can understand Jesus' words in another way also: that the rock on which Jesus builds his church is the firm foundation that we acquire, when we too confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah – when we confess that he is OUR Lord, and OUR Saviour.

When we do this, then we are certainly building our lives on rock.

When we have Jesus as the solid foundation of our lives, on which everything else depends, we will certainly become those living stones of whom St Peter wrote, in our second reading.

God called and anointed Jesus as his precious cornerstone.

And he calls each of us, as his precious children, to be living stones – set alongside Jesus. His love for us is like the mortar that holds us to Jesus, that holds us to one another – so that we may be this spiritual house, this spiritual home, this spiritual community, this spiritual family.

And, together as his holy priesthood, we are to help those around us find their connection with the God who loves every one of his children, every part of his creation.

Wherever there is brokenness, you are to share Christ's healing.

Wherever there is hunger (physical or spiritual), you are to share the Bread of Life.

Wherever people feel trapped and oppressed, you are to share the glorious freedom of new life in Christ.

Wherever there is abandonment, you are to share the love of the God who is love.

Wherever there is fear, you are to share this safe refuge with God our rock.

And as living stones, you are to share the abundant life of Christ, wherever people are diminished, or downcast.

And so our calling today, is not the same as Jesus' words to his disciples at the end of the Gospel reading.

He warned them not to tell people that he was the Christ.

Why was this? Well, at that point, people were going to misunderstand completely what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ.

They thought the Messiah would be like a second King David, winning military victories, throwing out the Roman occupiers, setting up a new throne, making the nation rich and powerful again.

But Jesus knew that the Christ had to die, in order to overcome death, and that this was a far more glorious task.

In the very next verses of St Matthew's Gospel, we read how Jesus began to teach the disciples that, as the Christ, he had to die.

And again it is Peter – impetuous Peter, who sometimes gets things wonderfully right, and sometimes gets things terribly wrong – again it is Peter who responds first, saying 'Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!' and Jesus says those terrible words 'Get behind me Satan.'

Peter had completely misunderstood what it was for Jesus to be the Christ.

It was only after the resurrection that he finally grasped the truth. Only then could he preach openly and fully what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ.

Yet we are Easter people – we know about the crucifixion and the resurrection, and we understand why Jesus died and was raised for us all.

And so our task is not to remain silent, but to share this good news.

St Mark's has the most wonderful story to tell.

Yes, it is remarkable that this church building has stood so firmly, upon this piece of rock, and survived the ravages of apartheid; and survived the development of the Technikon; and even survived the building regulations of the City Council – which we know are for our safety and well-being!

But more than this, St Mark's has survived as a place of living stones, built together for the glory of God, on the foundation that is Jesus Christ.

He has kept you together, kept you faithful, through all the turbulent years! I congratulate you, and I give thanks to God, for all he has done in you, and through you. I give thanks for the remarkable testimony you have to share.

This is the story that we want to proclaim, through today's celebration, and in our use of the new undercroft.

Buildings do not last for ever. Even mountains eventually wear away with erosion.

But God can be trusted for ever! He is faithful through thick and thin!

If we are faithful to him, he will see us through everything that we face in life.

Like the people of Nehemiah's time, we can say 'the God of heaven will give us success: we his servants will start rebuilding'.

God gives us success, because this is his building – not the bricks and stones, important though they are – but because we are his living stones.

Let us delight in him, as he builds his kingdom in us and through us!

To him be the glory and the praise, now and for ever.

Amen.