

Archbishop Dr Thabo Makgoba
Patronal Festival, St Peter's Mowbray
26 June 2011

Note: Sunday June 26th is the 10th anniversary of Dave Meldrum's ordination as a Deacon, at Chelmsford Cathedral in England; and it is also the 12 anniversary of his marriage to Bev

Acts 12:1-11 (Good News Version – read by children)

About this time, King Herod began to persecute some members of the church. He had James, the brother of John, put to death by the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he went on to arrest Peter. (This happened during the time of the Festival of Unleavened Bread.) After his arrest, Peter was put in jail, where he was handed over to be guarded by four groups of four soldiers each. Herod planned to put him on trial in public after Passover. So Peter was kept in jail, but the people of the church were praying earnestly to God for him. The night before Herod was going to bring him out to the people, Peter was sleeping between two guards. He was tied with two chains, and there were guards on duty at the prison gate. Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood there, and a light shone in the cell. The angel shook Peter by the shoulder, woke him up, and said, 'Hurry! Get up!' At once the chains fell off Peter's hands. Then the angel said, 'Fasten your belt and put on our sandals.' Peter did so, and the angel said, 'Put your cloak round you and come with me.' Peter followed him out of the prison, not knowing, however, if what the angel was doing was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed by the first guard post and then the second, and came at last to the iron gate leading into the city. The gate opened for them by itself, and they went out. They walked down a street, and suddenly the angel left Peter. Then Peter realised what had happened to him, and said, 'Now I know that it is really true! The Lord send his angel to rescue me from Herod's power and from everything the Jewish people expected to happen.'

Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV).

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked the disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

May I speak in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Dear people of God of St Peter's Mowbray, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let me say again what a joy it is to be with you today.

Thank you, Rector (Dave – and his wife Bev), thank you wardens, thank you everyone, for your invitation to be here, and for your warm welcome [on this chilly day].

And let me say a special thank you to everyone involved in today's service.

I know that includes Richard Haigh, the organist, for the music – and not only St Peter's Choir, but also those who have come from Christ Church Kenilworth to boost the numbers!

And let me also say thank you in advance to the Women's Fellowship for the refreshments after the service!

Today is a day of great celebrations. We celebrate the Feast of St Peter himself.

And we celebrate the life of this Church – giving thanks to God for the long history of St Peter's, for faithful worship here since 1854.

We give thanks for the generations of faithful people, and faithful clergy – giving thanks most of all to the faithfulness of God, who has sustained, and strengthened, and encouraged, and led, and guided, over so many years; and who continues to do the same today.

This church, this suburb of Cape Town has seen so many changes over more than a century and a half – and the changes still continue!

And though the God, whom we see in Jesus Christ, 'is the same, yesterday, today and for ever' (Heb 13:8), he is also greater than any changes that come our way, and he will lead us safely through.

This is something we know from the life of St Peter.

When he was just a fisherman on Lake Galilee, Jesus said to him 'Follow me', and he followed.

I don't suppose he had any idea where Jesus would lead him. Perhaps if he did, he might have had second thoughts!

But he followed faithfully – travelling with Jesus for three years, being taught by him, sometimes being sent by Jesus (with other disciples) to speak about the kingdom of God.

Then came Jesus' crucifixion – and we remember how Peter denied Jesus and then ran away and hid.

But the risen Christ put him back on the right track – meeting with him on the beach at Galilee, and calling him to 'feed my sheep'; in other words, to become a leader and a pastor for all who follow Jesus.

And on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon him, and we read through the book of Acts – as in our first reading today – how Peter the fisherman from the middle of nowhere, became a great spiritual leader!

I really love St Peter, because he is so human. Sometimes he made a complete fool of himself. Sometimes he totally misunderstood what Jesus was saying to him. Sometimes he let Jesus down in a big way – as when he denied Jesus.

But every time, he was ready to begin again – and Jesus was more than ready to reach out and help him make a fresh start, and to give him the encouragement to go forward, even if it was taking him way outside his comfort zone!

So, whenever we feel that we have messed up, and let God down; or whenever we feel that being a Christian might be taking us outside our comfort zone – then St Peter is our man!

He shows us how the loving God is there for every one of us! Always ready to say 'follow me!' and to show us the way ahead, even if it is just the next step.

So we thank God today for his faithfulness to St Peter the fisherman, and we thank him for his faithfulness to St Peter's Mowbray – and we thank God for the way he has sent Dave and Bev to this Church, and we thank God for the way he is helping you all find your way forwards through all the changes in this suburb, this city, this country, at this time.

So, there is a lot to celebrate here today.

In fact, there are two other celebrations today. Do you know what they are?

Something happened 12 years ago today ... Dave and Bev got married!

Let us give them a round of applause!

And something else happened 10 years ago today ... Dave was ordained a deacon.

Let us give him a round of applause for that too!

Now, I am going to come back to those anniversaries in a minute – because they can help us understand the reading we heard from St Matthew's gospel.

Let's remind ourselves what it was about.

Jesus asks his disciples – his followers – a question.

'Who do people say I am?'

They say people are gossiping that Jesus is a holy man from the past, who God has sent back to them.

But then Jesus asks another question.

He says to them 'Who do you say I am?'

Now, this is a very different sort of question.

We get lots of questions in life – especially if you are at school!

How many of you have just had exams?

I expect you were asked lots of questions, to check how much you know – what you know about geography or history or science.

Jesus first question is a sort of 'knowing about' question.

Do you know what other people are saying about me, he asks.

But the second question is very different. It is not a 'knowing about' sort of question.

And this brings me back to Dave and Bev.

When you got married, you were asked questions, weren't you?

But Dave wasn't asked questions to prove that he knew about Bev – when her birthday was, what she likes to eat for breakfast, which is her favourite colour, etc.

And Bev did not have to pass an exam showing that she knew about Dave – though I expect everyone knows that he is an Arsenal supporter!

No, they were asked 'Dave, will you take Bev to be your wife?' and 'Bev, will you take Dave to be your husband?' and they were asked if they would love and comfort and honour and protect each other, and be faithful to each other, for the rest of their lives.

So their answers they gave were not 'What do you know about this person' but rather 'Who is this person, for you?' And the answer is 'This is the person I want to be married to – this is the person to whom I commit myself for the rest of my life.'

This is much closer to the question Jesus asks his disciples. 'Who do YOU say I am?'

When Peter replies 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', he is not trying to pass an exam about Jesus.

He is saying who Jesus is for him: 'You are MY Lord and MY Saviour – and I commit myself to follow you, for the rest of my life.'

Dave – you were also asked questions when you were ordained, weren't you?

Now, they were not questions to test what you knew about theology and the church, were they?

You had already had to write essays and pass exams, I am sure!

But at the ordination, you were asked questions like 'Do you believe you are called by God and his church to the life and work of a Deacon?' and 'Do you accept this responsibility?'

And then you were asked other questions, like 'Will you be diligent in prayer, and in reading Holy Scripture?' and 'Will you promote unity, peace, and love ...?' and 'Will you, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, continually stir up the gift of God that is in you, to make Christ known to all people?'

So these too, are questions about committing your life.

And the really important thing for us today, is that you did not answer these questions by saying 'Yes!'

Instead, the answer was 'By the help of God, I will – By the help of God, I will.'

For it is God, and God's help, that enables us to keep the commitments that we make with our lives – whether they are commitments to our husband or wife, or to be a deacon or priest or bishop – like Bev and Dave; or whether they are – for all of us – commitments to live as a Christian.

For the question that Jesus asked his disciples is the same one that he asks to every human being.

He says to us 'Who do you say I am?'

He is not asking us what we know about Christianity.

He is asking us if we, like St Peter, are ready to follow him, wherever he leads us – to let him be our Lord and Saviour.

In other words, he asks if we are ready to live life his way, do things his way, let him help us decide on all the important decisions in our lives.

And the good news is, that we can answer like Dave answered 'By the help of God, I will.'

For we know that if Jesus calls us to follow him – and he does indeed call every one of us – then, just as he helped St Peter, he will help us.

He will help us, if, like Peter we misunderstand, if we make fools of ourselves, if we mess up, if we let Jesus down – he will always help us, no matter what – as long as we are ready to let him help us.

So, as we celebrate the life of St Peter, and the life of St Peter's church, today – today also, we hear Jesus' question to each one of us 'Who do you say I am?'

And, with St Peter, we dare to say 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'.

For we know that when he calls us, saying to each of us 'Follow me' – our answer is 'By the help of God, I will', for he is the one who will help us keep this promise.

So may he bless all of you at St Peter's Mowbray, today – may he bless the life of this Church, and may he make you a blessing to the community in Mowbray that you serve – so that people may come to see that Jesus is their Saviour and Lord; and that, if they follow him, he will help them, as they live through all the changes that life brings.

Amen