

**St Peter's Belsize Park
Dedication Festival
11th November 2009
The Dean of Westminster**

Genesis 28: 11-18; I Peter 2: 1-10; John 10: 22-29

I am honoured and delighted to be with you tonight as together we celebrate 150 years of God's love and grace ministered to the community of Belsize Park through this church dedicated to St Peter. Your invitation to me acknowledges the long association between Westminster Abbey, itself dedicated to St Peter, and Belsize Park. You may suppose that 150 years is a goodly time for such a relationship. In fact the manor of Hampstead was given by King Ethelred the Unready to the Abbey around the year 1,000, so we can celebrate over a thousand years of our connection. I am hoping someone later can suggest how the Abbey can get Hampstead back.

The Abbey preserved most of the lands at Hampstead much as they were until the 19th century. The Prior of Westminster had a country house at Belsize, which means beautiful seat, from 1318 until the dissolution of the monastery in 1540. Until 1850 it was still an area of country houses standing in parkland. But an Act of 1842 enabled church lands to be let on long building leases, and it was the lessees who managed the development, with the Abbey sometimes buying back leases and re-letting. Most of the work was done by only a few builders, which led to the homogeneity of the area. The Dean & Chapter of Westminster were landlords not speculators.

The newly emerging housing required a church and in 1859 the Dean and Chapter gave the land, with an endowment from ground rents of £200 a year. The first vicar, F W Tremlett, paid for the nave and transepts. He seems to have been quite a character, at the time of the American Civil War a great Confederate supporter, who entertained many confederate visitors. He died in 1913 at the age of 92 in the midst of an energetic campaign against socialism. I digress. The connection between Belsize Park and the Abbey was broken in 1868, when the ownership of the land was passed to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, now the Church Commissioners, although the Dean and Chapter maintained its patronage, in other words the power to appoint the incumbent. I am glad to acknowledge tonight our thousand years' connection.

In the second lesson this evening we heard Peter say to his hearers, "Come to the Lord, a living stone." That has obvious relevance when we are thinking about the building of this parish church. I hope the church is built on firm foundations. I'm told that the Abbey is built on gravel such as you might find on a sea-shore or the edge of a river. Indeed, the Abbey is built on a shore. Only a couple of feet to the north of the Abbey Church is an underground river that runs under St Margaret's Church. The whole site of the Abbey is surrounded by rivers. It was known as Thorney Island. So we need firm foundations. Christians need firm foundations. We think of Jesus' parable of the house built on sand that fell when the rain fell and the winds blew, compared with the house built on rock that withstood all the elements.

I find it interesting that the letter ascribed to St Peter talks of the Lord Jesus as the "living stone." By contrast St Matthew's Gospel describes Peter as the rock. Which is right? The question is not only relevant to biblical scholarship; it could have a direct bearing on current debates in the Church about what is called the primacy of Peter, in other words, the position of the Pope as Peter's successor. The first epistle ascribed to St Peter could have been written quite early, possibly even in the year AD 60, a few years before Peter died, and so could easily have been written by St Peter himself. He describes the Lord as the living stone. St Matthew's Gospel was written perhaps twenty or more years later. There we see Jesus himself at Caesarea Philippi, after Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of the living God, declaring Peter to be the rock: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." [Matthew 16: 17, 18] So, are we to think of Jesus as the living stone, the foundation of the Church, or is it Peter the rock on whom the Church is built? On the answer might depend our attitude to the claims of Peter's successor the Pope.

In fact, there is no simple either/or. The words of St Paul in the letter to the Ephesians [2: 19, 20] help us. "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the corner-stone." So, Christ Jesus is the corner-stone of the ecclesiastical house and the apostles and prophets are the foundations. This is a little different from the Matthean version of the moment at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus identifies Peter as the rock on which the Church is to be built.

This question about the foundation of the Church has come into greater prominence recently, at least for Anglicans. The Pope has just made an offer to Anglicans dissatisfied with possible developments in the Anglican understanding about the Church and about holy orders (in other words people who are against the ordination of women as bishops). He has said there is something wonderful about the Anglican patrimony of liturgy and spirituality, in other words about the way Anglicans pray and live out our Christian lives. He has further implied that this Anglican way of life would be fully compatible with Roman Catholicism if it weren't for the problem of the ordination of women. What ifs are dangerous but I could say, 'If only popes had said the same thing thirty years ago!' And now he has offered amazing concessions that would allow Anglican spirituality to flourish within Roman Catholicism. The problem for me is not really papal infallibility but the pope's immediate ordinary jurisdiction. I have no problem with the idea of the Pope having a primacy of honour.

The words of Ephesians point to a more diffuse, more dispersed, understanding of the nature of authority in the Church. Where the authority of Peter has been used to best effect it has been in the exercise of persuasive authority and, above all, authority that justifies itself in that it points to Christ, is truly Christ-focussed and Christ-centred. Earlier this week we celebrated the memory of St Leo the Great, a fifth century Pope, who was able to use his teaching authority to help the universal Church come to a conclusion about how to understand the person of Christ as "perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man." But it was for all the bishops meeting together to come to a conclusion on the matter. It might be more messy, but it seems to be more right. It is certainly what inspires us as Anglicans. But authority, we must remember is not a thing in itself, exercised for its own sake; it is always for the sake of the Body of Christ and it always points to Christ, leads the believer and the Church as a whole to be more like Christ.

So the conclusion I reach is that it is not only the Pope as successor of Peter who can claim Petrine authority in the Church. Or to put it another way, "you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." As members of the Body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we all share in the task of pointing to Christ and enabling ourselves and others to become more Christ-like.

We are celebrating 150 years of history; there seems little reason not to suppose that the church here will have many more centuries in which to exercise a ministry in this place. I pray that almighty God will enable the Petrine ministry of the Church here in Belsize Park truly and authentically to lead its members and many others to become more like Christ.