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The New Testament revolves around four primary characters, Jesus, St. Paul, St. John and St. Peter, whose feast we celebrate today. Simon Peter appears in both major parts of the New Testament: first the Gospels, in which he is a part of the inner circle of disciples and then the Book of Acts and the Epistles, which tell us what happened to the church after Jesus ascends to heaven. And as John the Baptist builds a bridge between the Old and the New Testaments, St. Peter provides a bridge between the two sections of the New Testament itself.

St. Peter is such a dynamic character in the Scriptures because he is so human. He has flaws and shortcomings; he often seems to be impatient and intemperate. Because of his personality and his humanness in the Gospels, it is easy for us to identify ourselves with him. Peter is so much like us, he wants to be loyal and good, but he does not always understand clearly what is really going on, and, also like us, Peter has some difficulty facing up to his shortcomings and his real motives. After the Holy Ghost comes down upon the apostles at Pentecost, Peter is different. The transformation of Peter before and after Pentecost is almost shocking. Before, Peter was a little bit dense, hence the nickname *Rocky*. He was short tempered and brooding, and then suddenly, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, this uneducated fisherman understands the Scriptures more clearly than ever before; better even than the Scribes and the Pharisees. He also has a more definite sense of what God is up to in his life, and he shows new capacity for growth and change. This is what makes St. Peter such an interesting figure, for the more we get to know Peter as the New Testament portrays him, the more he becomes the image of what the Holy Ghost can do in our lives if we cooperate with Him.

The Gospel for today is rather brief, but it is full of enormously important teaching. Jesus asks the disciples what the people in the crowds He attracts say about him. *Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?* This might seem like any other self-reflective conversation, but the Theologian, George Buttrick writes, *This is a soul arresting affair. (For Jesus) was a carpenter in a village not rich in heroic names. He had neither learning nor money wealth. The leaders of His day did not believe in Him. He left His teachings, but no writings to the precious memory of His friends. He framed no statecraft, propounded no Philosophy, led no army, wrote no music. Historians of His time thought him unworthy of mention. His cradle was a borrowed manger, his deathbed a felon's cross.* Jesus asks His disciples, *Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?* The disciples report that some people say he is John the Baptist, some say he is the second coming of Elijah, others say he is Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets. Jesus does not dwell on any

of that. Instead, he turns the question around on the disciples and asks them, *But what do you think about me -- whom say ye that I am?* And Peter blurts out, *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

St. Peter's answer is startling. We get the idea from the Scriptures that no one really expected him, of all the disciples, to confess first that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God. He was after all, an unlearned fisherman, with calloused hands and a weathered face. And yet, St. Peter's reply to the question lays out the two main things we believe about Jesus: first, He is the Saviour God promised Israel in the Old Testament -the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ: and, second, He is God, God the Son, the Second person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus says to Peter, *Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee.* Then Jesus gives Simon a nickname and proceeds to make a pun with it. The Greek word for rock is *petra* So Jesus says, *"You are Peter - Rocky; and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it."* St. Peter, who was sometimes a little bit dense, who had often missed Jesus' point so many times before the crucifixion, in that moment had no trouble recognizing Jesus for who He is.

And what about that passage where Jesus says, *and on this rock I will build my church?* Most people's minds go in one of two directions, either Jesus is speaking literally about St. Peter, or about his confession. So, people use this verse in debates about the pope. Tradition tells us that Peter was the first pope, the first Bishop of Rome. The Roman Church makes claims about his successors in that office based in part on the fact that Jesus said He would build the church on Peter. Others argue that *the rock* was not Peter himself, but Peter's confession of faith. There is no doubt that Peter was the chief disciple, and there is no doubt that Peter was a part of the founding of many of the most important churches in the apostolic age, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome being only the most obvious examples. We can acknowledge that Peter was, in that sense, *the rock* on which Jesus built the church.

But it is just as important, that at the end of today's Gospel, Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven to signify what kind of ministry that St. Peter and the Apostle's would have. The key to heaven is forgiveness. We can experience this through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also called Confession. And so, Jesus gave Peter the authority to forgive sins, as he did to the other apostles as his mission unfolded. In a little while I shall exercise that authority for you because the Church has passed it to me. I will make the sign of the cross to assure you that what Jesus did on the cross forgives your sins, as the Gospel says, *and*

*whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

We, as Anglicans, can believe that the church is built upon both *rocks*, both the man St. Peter and the Apostles, and what he said about who Jesus is. St. Peter did not just confess that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, he was willing to sacrifice his life for it, eventually being crucified upside down, because he considered himself unworthy to be crucified like Christ. *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, this is the Apostolic faith, the Creed says the church is apostolic, because we continue steadfastly in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship. This is the Apostolic and Catholic faith, that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. The fellowship of the apostles is in the succession of believing bishops, the Church. Both the teaching and the fellowship trace back directly to *the rock*, who is Peter himself.

Jesus says in another place, *Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock.* And that is why, no matter how bad things look, the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.