

*You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.*

This is one of the most-argued about passages in the New Testament, a real church-divider. In the Reformation in the sixteenth century, when Protestants left the Roman Catholic Church, divergent readings of this passage filled the air.

The Roman church insisted that the authority given to Peter was passed on to the bishops who served in Rome,

where Peter had been martyred,

where the church tended his relics, tomb, and memory.

The bishop of Rome and allegiance to him were, they insisted, a Christ-directed sign of the real church.

On this rock, Peter, I will found my church.

They took it to be a very personal reference to Peter and to those they considered his successors.

And for good reason, we must admit.

There is some word play here between the name *Petros* and the word for rock, *petra*.

Jesus did indeed take a particular interest in Peter, who witnessed powerful things in Jesus' ministry

and who clearly was a chief shepherd to the church after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Our Anglican tradition has acknowledged the significance of Peter's legacy in the Roman Church; we've said in ecumenical dialogues that we will be ready

to acknowledge a renewed and reformed papacy when one develops.

Yet that has more to do with the history of the church than with the reading of this passage in its own right and by the light of the gospel of Matthew.

Here is the essential question: Exactly what is Jesus referring to when he said "on this rock"?

What is the bedrock?

It looks to me more like a reference to Peter's faithful confession of Jesus as the Messiah than to Peter himself or anything else.

It is on the knowledge of Jesus as the Savior that the church will be built.

Those who know that Jesus is the Savior and who will proclaim it are the bedrock on which the church will be built.

Tradition, a succession of bishops, creeds and sacraments, etc, will be helpful but will be nothing without that faithful confession.

As we get ready to start a new year in Sunday School and Christian formation, there is certainly a word for us here.

The articulate confession of Jesus as Lord and the living in to all that should mean for a human life is our purpose here.

If we don't find and share a faith in Jesus Christ, it isn't clear that the rest of what we do will matter much in the long run.

The YMCA offers day camps and tutoring programs.

The county library offers opportunities to read and discuss books.

You can drink coffee and talk to people at the Westside Café.

We too offer opportunities to drink coffee and chat, to read and discuss books, and day camps and tutoring.

We offer some of that to the wider community in order to be known and to have relationships, that we might have a chance to say something about Christ and life in his body, the Church.

But if we are too bashful to say something about Jesus when we get the chance

and if we are not raising up next generations who have something to say about Jesus the Savior, we are charting a sure path to our own extinction.

An articulated knowledge of Jesus as Lord is the bedrock of our church's life;

on which everything else must be built.

But I know you go away from this place and the rest of your life happens.

Work and family and groceries, all the getting and spending and enjoying and grieving that makes a human life.

If we know what bedrock the church must be built on, does that knowledge carry over into our wider sense of ourselves?

On what rock are you building your life?

Many things offer themselves as potential footings for a well-lived life.

Your financial security is frequently offered to you as such; the right mix of insurance, investments, and planning undergirds the rest of life.

Many commercials during golf telecasts assure me of this.

Family seems to be a contender for bedrock material.

Joined to "faith and friends," many little signs you can buy at Hobby Lobby profess this faith in the rock of family.

It is a natural way to feel.

The success or well-being of your children becomes for many the aspiration on which we base the rest of life.

Or your marriage may seem to be the thing that holds the rest of it up

None of these, of course, are terrible things.

Some are holy and life-giving.

In addition to Jesus, certainly every life needs things to structure it.

They are like other layers on a tall cake, quite close to the foundation.

But it isn't clear that the fullness of life can be had if any of these are the absolute bottom.

It isn't clear that any of these can be the bedrock.

For there are earthquakes: illness, divorce, stock market crashes, cheating spouses, wayward children, and cultural change.

I hope you live through none of those things, but if you do, what will you find underneath the suddenly shifting sands?

Can you get to a bottom, where your feet find solidity, hope, and divine compassion?

You can if you have built the rest on the rock of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

A loving and faithful church, as well as a loving and faithful life, can be built on him.

We have been called together to find and share that confession of faith.

The high calling of blessed Peter is ours as well,

finding and sharing our confession of faith,

that we might be part of the structure on which Christ is still building his church.