

An Address by David James Trinity 11 Yr A

The story goes that the hunter was out on the side of the mountain when suddenly he noticed steam rising from a cleft in the rock. Intrigued, he approached the edge of a deep crevasse from where emerged the sound of a torrent and clouds of steam. The cleft was eventually explored by some intrepid climber and at the bottom was indeed a torrent of crystal clear mountain water which was hot to touch - 36.5°C to be precise.

This is the Tamina gorge in a Swiss alpine valley, and its water has become the source for what is nowadays a luxury spa. Its healing properties have been used since at least the 13th century when the sick were lowered down to benefit from the waters, but now you can stay in the height of 21st century luxury at Bad Ragaz Hotel, and if you've got a bit of money in the bank you can stay in one of the top suites for a mere £10k a night - yes, per night.

I learnt all these facts from a series called *Amazing Hotels* in which the restaurant critic, Giles Coren, and Michelin-starred chef, Monica Galetti, explore behind the scenes of some of the world's most breathtaking establishments - you may have seen this one.

Well, it came to mind when I read today's passage from Isaiah and the gospel account of Jesus' visit to Caesarea Philippi. The phrase that caught my attention was 'Look to the rock from which you were hewn and the quarry from which you were dug.'

Isaiah here is reminding people of God's amazing grace demonstrated in their history of salvation - starting with Abraham and Sarah, both as good as dead as far as childbearing was concerned, when Sarah conceived their only son, Isaac, the father of Esau and Jacob whom God renamed Israel. Abraham who was only one, was told his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the heavens, and so it proved. Abraham became Israel.

You see, says Isaiah, God can be relied upon to bring life out of barrenness 'he will make her wilderness like Eden'. God is the eternal re-creator, the one who is ready to raise his arm in strength to save - 'the coastlands wait for me,' says the Lord, 'and for my arm they hope.'

Look to the rock. It is a frequent metaphor in the OT for God. Think for a moment of what you naturally associate with the word (but cast out any thoughts of Brighton!). Here are just a few of the images in scripture:

A place to hide in; Isaiah 2.21 - *Enter the caverns of the rocks And the clefts in the crags From the terror of the Lord*

God himself; Deut. 32.4 - *The Rock, his work is perfect And all his ways are just.*

A place of security; Ps 62.2 - *God alone is my rock and my salvation My stronghold so that I shall never be shaken*

Then there is the unexpected but important picture of the rock as source of life-giving water. This, of course, comes from the story of Moses striking the rock in the wilderness to bring out a gushing stream for the parched Israelites to drink from and water their flocks.

That is an image that recurs time and again in the HB but St Paul also picks it up when he refers to the Israelites' time wandering in the wilderness in his first letter to the Corinthians. He sees crossing the Red Sea as a prefiguring of baptism and the sending of manna from heaven and water to drink as a foretaste of the Christian Eucharist -

'All were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ'.

This imagery has permeated Christian spirituality too, particularly its hymnody - think of the words of Cwm Rhondda, the hymn *Guide me O thou great Redeemer* -

Open now the crystal fountain whence the healing stream doth flow.

Another well-known hymn also draws on these Biblical stories:

Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

- an image drawn from God hiding Moses in the cleft of the rock as his glory passed by.

The name of the tune for that hymn is Petra - the Greek word for a rock. And that's the key to the pun in the gospel passage today. Jesus has already given Peter the name Cephas - the word for rock in Aramaic and so he builds on it as it were by telling him that on the foundation of this rock he will build his church. It's a play on words in the Greek text - 'You are Petros and on this petra I will build my church.'

If you were to go to Caesarea Philippi today, and I expect some of you have, you will understand why Jesus hits on this particular metaphor. He and his disciples will be very familiar with all those images of rocks and water and their resonances in the Hebrew Bible and there they are now in Caesarea Philippi surrounded by high rocks. The place is up in the hills in the north of Israel and you look up at these massive cliffs which dominate the landscape there.

And out of these rocks comes a rushing torrent of crystal clear water. It is in fact the source of the river Jordan, formed by underground meltwater from Mt Hermon,

which pours out of the mouth of a huge cave at the foot of the cliffs to begin its journey down to the Dead Sea.

The place today is called Banyas, which reveals its classical origins. It is the place where the god Pan was thought to dwell, and the cave was believed to be the place which was the entrance to the underworld that Pan presided over. Once you know that, all of a sudden Jesus' giving the keys of death and hell to Peter takes on a new sense. Something greater than pagan superstition is here. The power that Christ gives his Church is one that brings light out of the darkness of the cave and pours out his healing and life-giving stream.

Then when Jesus is taken down from the cross he is buried in a tomb carved out of the rock and a huge stone is placed at the entrance. This is the place from where new life will flow; Christ, the living water will gush forth from the cave and will fill the whole earth.

So the scriptures today fill us with such thoughts and encourage us to know that no matter what our uncertain life, shadowed by death or disaster or pain or injustice may bring, we still have a rock in Christ to whom we can cling and from this rock new life will emerge. Ultimately God's purpose is sure. As Isaiah says, Look to the rock from which you are hewn. Know that from him healing waters flow and new life abounds, such life as nothing can extinguish, such power of recreation as no power can overcome. These, then, are uplifting scriptures for hard and worried times.

But do they make a difference? Are they any help when it really comes to the crunch or are they just pretty pictures? I believe they do make a real difference because they shape our inner lives more than perhaps we realise. When we are at our limits as human beings these are the images that manage to articulate and frame our innermost feelings.

We visited my son in Bristol recently and as I think I may have mentioned before, when we go we usually manage to watch on Netflix another episode of the series *The Crown*. This time we watched the one which included the terrible disaster of Aberfan in 1966.

Some of you will remember it. After days of torrential rain a huge coal tip, turned to slurry by an underground spring, suddenly began its inexorable slide down the side of the mining valley in S Wales, a few miles from where my family lived.

There was a primary school filled with children in the village which lay in the path of this massive black mudslide. It was engulfed in moments. 116 children were killed and 144 people in total died in the disaster. The most moving scene was at the funeral of the children when the community gathered around the long communal grave. Shaped by the faith and congregational singing of the chapel, they spontaneously

burst into song. In the face of a river of death and hades they sang instead of healing streams of life. We can't sing them unfortunately but we can listen now to words by Charles Wesley matched by the powerful tune Aberystwyth. Let's do that now.

Jesu, lover of my soul, Let me to thy bosom fly, While the nearer waters roll, While the tempest still is high: hide me, O my Saviour, hide Till the storm of life is past; Safe into the haven guide, O receive my soul at last.

Plenteous grace with thee is found, Grace to cover all my sin; Let the healing streams abound, Make and keep me pure within. Thou of life the fountain art,

Freely let me take of thee, Spring thou up within my heart, Rise to all eternity.