Readings for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

23rd August 2026

First Reading: Isaiah 51:1-6

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah, who bore you,
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation,
for a teaching will go out from me
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
I will bring near my deliverance swiftly;
my salvation has gone out,
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens
and look at the earth beneath,
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats,
but my salvation will be forever,
and my deliverance will never be ended.

Second Reading: Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed

by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Gospel: St Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, '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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

A Reflection for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

from Rev'd Anne Macdonald

Today's Gospel passage comes after Jesus had spent a significant period of time teaching the crowds who had flocked to see him and listen to God's Word. Worried by Jesus's interpretation of the scriptures, and the number of people listening to him, some of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who considered themselves to be the experts on scripture, had questioned Jesus, trying to trip him up and discredit him in the eyes of the people. This leads us to the beginning of today's passage where Jesus goes on to question his disciples about the people's view of himself: 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' They gave a variety of answers: John the Baptist; Elijah; Jeremiah, and no doubt others. Then Jesus asked them for their view: 'But who do you say that I am?' All that is recorded is that Simon Peter replied: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' This directness and accuracy is not something we often associate with Simon Peter.

Sometimes we might be tempted to think that Jesus called his twelve closest disciples to follow him because they were special in some way. Or, we might think that they were sitting waiting and hoping for a call to go out and spread the Word of God, having passed the equivalent, for their time, of the battery of tests that are necessary just to get a job interview today. However, as far as we can tell from reading the New Testament these twelve did not expect to be called. They were not experts in the scriptures. Most of them were busy working in their family businesses, supporting their parents. That is not to say that they were not well informed about their faith, but their focus was on earning a living through business. Despite this, we also know that they heard Jesus calling and followed him, leaving everything behind and beginning a new and lifelong journey. An astonishing thing to do.

Notwithstanding that they answered Jesus's call, we certainly do not get the impression that the twelve disciples really understood what they were undertaking or who Jesus was until after his death and resurrection. Peter is mentioned on a number of occasions, and he frequently shows us that he did not fully grasp what was going on although he did try to respond and to do what is right.

For a while I worked in Local Government. At that time officers presenting reports were only allowed to give a summary of their report and then to answer questions on the report; even if it was clear that the information had been misunderstood. Thankfully, there were a few councillors who were prepared to show that they did not quite follow the issue and to ask questions so that they were all able to reach an understanding. In my mind Peter fulfils a similar role. Peter asked questions; he acted spontaneously and did things like walking towards Jesus on the lake and then panicking; he answered before he had thought through the question, and Jesus took the opportunities presented to him by Simon Peter to talk further with his disciples about his mission and ministry. Dotted throughout the teaching stories we read passages where Jesus seeks to impart knowledge to the twelve, to prepare them for what is to come.

In this Gospel reading Jesus goes beyond that. He had teased out from Simon Peter, that he, Jesus, is the Messiah, the Son of God. Firstly, Jesus unambiguously confirmed to all within hearing distance that he was the Messiah by stating: 'Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father in heaven.' Although we should note that Jesus did not ask what Simon Peter, or the others, understood by the word Messiah. However, Jesus must have seen enough understanding on the part of Simon Peter at least to then indicate the important role he would undertake in the future. Jesus then gave Simon the name Cephas in Aramaic, meaning rock, which when translated into Greek is Petros, from which we derive Peter. Peter the rock on which the church was built. Peter who was given the 'Keys of Heaven'. If we had been present that day, I am pretty certain we would have been confused by the singling out of Peter. If we were also present in the courtyard of the High Priest on the night when Jesus was betrayed, when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, we might even have thought Jesus had made a mistake because Peter, in spite of this moment of divine inspiration in recognising Jesus, continued to vacillate. One moment he understood who Jesus was, the next moment he still had not fully grasped the enormity of what was to happen.

Jesus's words to Peter when he told him that he would be the rock on which the church would be built are momentous, but because of this we sometimes do not see Peter's journey. Peter could be described as an ordinary man. Peter was not poor, but he certainly was not wealthy. He had sufficient education but was not a religious expert. He almost certainly spoke a minimum of two languages, Aramaic at home and Greek since it was the lingua franca of business in the Holy Land at that time. He was a fisherman, but his family owned boats, so a small business owner like many people in the Northwest Highlands. In many ways just one of the regular guys around Galilee. Yet he had done something out of character; he got up and followed Jesus. Slowly he had become a prominent member of the disciples around Jesus, but as we have seen his progress was not linear. He went from being certain, as we read today, that Jesus was the Son of God; to cutting off the ear of one of the servants of the High Priest in the Garden of Gethsemane, to denying Jesus three times in the courtyard of the house of the High Priest. Then when the cock crowed Peter remembered Jesus's words to him and wept bitterly. So, Peter went back

and forth between hearing God and not listening to him, until, following the Resurrection of Jesus, Peter stood up and addressed the believers and took up the role Jesus had given him when he named him the rock.

I find the story of Peter's faith journey immensely encouraging. For many of us, faith is not one single moment of belief but a journey through life as we gradually grow closer to God. Jesus saw in Peter what Peter could not see in himself. In scripture we see Peter growing, as we are all called to do, until at last, Peter carried out the role Jesus asked him to fulfil. Like Peter, may we all continue to grow closer to God until we become what he sees in us.