



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (23rd August) 2026

Christ's affirmation of Peter in this morning's Gospel reading, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build My Church," is one of the most well-known dicta of the New Testament. It is inscribed around the eaves of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, reflecting its importance for the claims to the Petrine authority of the Papacy; it is set to any number of bits of music; and is often sung not just when the Pope, but any bishop enters a Solemn Liturgy.

Its very familiarity can occlude something rather counter-intuitive about its contents. We can most easily grasp this if we recall the words of the seventh century Latin hymn, *Angularis Fundamentum*, the opening words of which John Mason Neale rendered as, "Christ is made the sure foundation;" in other words, does the Church not rest on Christ rather than Peter? Is Saint Matthew getting carried away with himself in having Christ refer to Peter as the Church's foundation?

Yet, in the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostles - together, in this instance, with the prophets - are identified as the foundation of the Church. As we seek to understand the truth of these assertions, we learn something important about our own responsibility as Christian disciples.

The Church is, of course, the Body of Christ, as Saint Paul tells us; and integral to this truth is that in the era of the Renewed Covenant, an experience of the intense divine Presence is no longer confined to particular geographical locations - such as the Temple on Mount Zion. Rather, as Saint Matthew reports elsewhere in his Gospel, "Where two or three are gathered in [Christ's] Name, there is [He] with them." In other words, as the first Epistle General of Saint Peter suggests, it is primarily through people and not places that the risen Christ manifests His Presence.

It follows, therefore of course, that the risen Christ seeks out people in whom to plant His Church - to form the Body of Christ in the world. Another way of putting this is that He seeks out rocks on which to build His Church.

Peter and the other Apostles are, as it were, the Ur- rocks on which the Church is built; and over the centuries an archipelago of rock has extended and spread from this initial outcrop through time, on which the Church is established through the generations.

Of course, the Church is more than the sum of its earthly manifestations and the risen Christ is not constrained to acting through their structures. Never-the-less, the Church is an integral part of His work in the world, because He has chosen that it should be so.

We need, therefore, to reflect on the quality of the foundation which we are able to offer Jesus for His Church. In another passage in Saint Matthew's Gospel, Jesus contrasts the house built on sand with another built on rock. As His words to Saint Peter suggest, He seeks out solid foundations on which to build His Church. In those instances where the foundations are weak, the Church built on them will not weather the storms of life, which inevitably batter us from time to time.

Sand, of course, is just rock that has disintegrated and so we need to attend to the quality and constitution of the rock to ensure that it holds together so that what once was rock does not over time crumble into sand.

In a sense, to the extent that we sustain the life of the Church, without wishing to sound like a scene from *Spartacus - the Movie*, we are all Peter.