

BROKEN BUT BEAUTIFUL

University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

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Readings: Matthew 16.13-20, Romans 12.1-8

One of my favourite things to do on holiday is to walk along a beach just at the point where the waves and sand meet looking for shells. I have done this for years and I always look for the most perfect shells or, in the case of the beach in Maine where I go each summer, the perfect sand dollar.

To those who don't know, a sand dollar is species of an extremely flattened burrowing sea urchin. It lives on the floor of shallow sandy waters along the coasts of oceans and after it dies the urchin is washed up on the beach and bleached by the sun making it look like a large silver coin, such as the old Spanish or American dollar. Ergo, it's simple American name: sand dollar. When you pick it up from the sea shore it is an almost perfect circle and very beautiful indeed. In fact the legend goes that sand dollars are given spiritual meaning by some



Christians. According to some ancient stories and poems, the sand dollar represents the life of Christ and they are also symbols of grace and peace. Legend has it that there are five doves inside the shells that are free to bring goodwill to the world when the sand dollar is broken.

So in my quest for perfect sand dollar, I used to throw back any damaged or broken ones into the sea. But recently I have changed my mind. Looking more closely I decided this summer that the broken sand dollars, though not perfect, were beautiful in the own right and so I picked them up, treasured them and used them in my "sea art" I was making.

Now bear with me as we travel back 2000 years to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus was talking to his disciple. The passages that we have just read from Matthew's Gospel is sometimes referred to as "The Identification of Jesus" or "Peter's Confession of Christ", for it is the first time that Simon Peter recognises Jesus as the Son of God; the true Messiah.

Earlier on in Matthew's gospel, the disciples had once already hailed Jesus as "the Son of God" when he walked on water (Matthew 14.33).

And we have confirmation from God Himself when, at the time of the transfiguration in the next passage of Matthew, God says “This is my Son, My beloved” (Matthew 17.5).

But I want to focus on an extension of this conversation between Jesus and Peter.

Firstly Jesus points out to Peter that he could not have known who Jesus truly is without “His Father in heaven” planting the knowledge in him.

Jesus did not say it was Peter’s own personal spiritual insight but God’s – “My Father in Heaven” - working through Peter or, as the theologian Dr Michael Green says,

“in response to Peter, Jesus declares that no human insight gave him (Peter) this knowledge. Only God can reveal God: and God had revealed it to Simon Peter. Nobody can pierce through to Jesus’ identity by his own cleverness. That insight must be given by God himself”¹.

And secondly, DESPITE all Jesus knew about Peter, he chose him, above all the apostles, to be “the rock “ on which to base His Kingdom’s message and mission.

Jesus knew that Peter was far from perfect – he was a hot-headed fisherman from the village of Capernaum on the sea of Galilee who, on at least three occasions had shown and would show both weakness, vulnerability and even a loss of faith.

Three occasions:

1. Just before coming to Caesarea Phillipe Peter had a loss of faith. When Peter saw Jesus walking on water he tried to get out of the boat and greet him “*but when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord save me”.* Jesus immediately reached out his hand and said “*you of little faith, why did you doubt me?*” (Matthew 14.30).
2. Peter thought he was better than Jesus when Jesus told his disciples of his impending trial, death and resurrection. Peter, probably unable to cope with the horror that would befall his Lord and Master, “*took Him aside and began rebuking him*”. (Mark 8.32).
3. And of course most importantly and most famously Peter denied Jesus: “*And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the words of the Lord. Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times. So Peter went out and wept bitterly*” (Luke 22 61-62). Peter was perhaps just too tired, too ashamed, too frightened to stand up for the Lord.

To me this is really an extraordinary passage and deeply encouraging because, despite Peter’s brokenness, his flaws and his humanity, Jesus still loves and trust him to be the “rock” while

¹Green M. *The Message of Matthew*. Leicester, 2000, p.179.

recognising God's work within him. Peter did not have to be, nor was, perfect to receive the most important commission from his Lord and Master - he just had to have insight and faith.

St Paul has called this love our "underserved grace". Though not perfect ourselves (like the damaged sand dollar we are chipped and broken), we are still worthy of God's love.

The 17C priest and poet (1593-1633), George Herbert, wrote a great poem portraying God as "Love" and he sums up this sense of his own personal unworthiness so very beautifully.

Herbert felt that he did not deserve to be loved as he was guilty of unkindness and ungratefulness, and thus unworthy to take in the Eucharist.

*"Love bade me welcome but my soul drew back.
I the unkinde, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I can not look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did rely,
Who made the eyes but I?"²*

And there are many, many examples of those who do not feel worthy of God's love and grace, but have received love despite their flaws. One such person is the famous Anglican Priest Revd Trevor Huddleston, best known for his anti-apartheid activism. He said,

"One thing I know about myself is my poverty and my frailty and my need. The one thing I know about God is that he chooses the weak things of the world to bring to light those things that are mighty: that is his strength, his power, his majesty made perfect in weaknesses."³

And that is one of God's greatest gifts to us - his love of us even through our vulnerability and brokenness. Why is understanding this so important?

Because our society is obsessed with achievement; judging people by their success in the outwards "works" they do.

In the week after GCSE and A level results some will feel elated but others deflated. Some might even think that their worthiness is related to and defined by their grades. Or the job they have or the works they do. For some that might be working in a food bank, for others with the homeless, for others being a carer for an elderly member of their family, and so it goes on. But you are not unconditionally loved by God for those actions.

² 'Love (III)', in P. Alexander (ed.), *Eerdmans Book of Christian Poetry*, 1984, p.27.

³ *The Christian Religion Explained: in a Course of Twenty-Three Anglican Sermons*. London, 1960, p.143.

God is much more interested in what you are than what you do. As the pastor Rick Warren puts it, “*we are human beings not human doings. God is more concerned with your character than career*”.⁴

We must make a counter-cultural decision to focus on becoming more like Jesus Christ otherwise other forces, like peers, parents, school and work, try to mould you into their image.

The former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harris wisely said, “*We don’t have to prove ourselves, justify ourselves or give a successful performance at anything. We are valuable as we are, loved and cherished by God as ourselves – not as anyone else, but ourselves*”⁵ as Peter was by Jesus, faults and all.

According to Romans 12.7, “*We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us*”. The meaning of ‘gift’ here is key, as St Paul reiterates in Ephesians 2.8, “*It is God’s gift, **not reward** for work done*”.

This is not to say that our ‘works’ are not important. In a world that is divided more than ever before, our works **do** matter because they express Kingdom values. However, they are reflection of this gift we have received from God, not a condition. So seek them out but do not be defined by them.

We, like sand dollars broken by the waves, are far from perfect yet still remain beautiful, worthy of God’s love and of His use of us in this world today.

Amen.

⁴ Warren R. *The Purpose Driven Life*. Zondervan Grand Rapids, 2002, p.177.

⁵ Harris R. *God outside the Box: Why Spiritual People Object to Christianity*. London, 2002, p.131.