

445 A Rock of Offence

Our Reflection last week compared the one-ness of humanity so evident in great sporting occasions with the division of humanity so evident in the varying responses made to the Lord Jesus Christ, the “Solid Rock” of Edward Mote’s hymn. “My hope is built on nothing less ...”.

Mote, a cabinet maker in London in 1834, later explained, “One morning it came into my mind, as I went to labour, to write a hymn on the “Gracious Experience of a Christian”. As I went up Holborn I had the chorus (“On Christ, the solid rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand”), and in the day I had four verses complete, and wrote them off”. Soon afterwards he left a copy of this hymn with a dying woman who was greatly blessed by the words, so he wrote two more verses and had a thousand copies printed. Mote became a Baptist minister at the, what was then, the grand old age of 55, in which he served until his death in 1874 aged 77. These few details, of interest in themselves, also encourage us that from a tiny seed within our minds the Lord is well able to bring a work of much blessing: worth pondering!

In Deuteronomy Chapter 32, in his great song of praise Moses sang, “... I will publish the name of the Lord: ascribe ye greatness unto our God. [He is] the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways [are] judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (from vv.3-4, KJV) – words which neatly sum up the theme of the Lord God being a Rock, and, in Christ, our Rock. In I Corinthians 10 we read that the children of Israel “drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ” (from vv.1 and 4, KJV / Exodus 17.6 / several references in the Psalms both to this incident, and to God being our Rock - see Concordance). So even there and then in the wilderness the people were being blessed by the yet-to-be-revealed Christ.

Back in Deuteronomy 32, God’s people had had “better” ideas of course! – “But Jeshurun (another name for the children of Israel, meaning literally “upright”) waxed fat, and kicked ... then he forsook God [which] made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation ... Of the Rock [that] begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee” (from vv.15 and 18). As a result of their folly we can predict what would happen next – sure enough, defeats in battles, because “their Rock had sold them, and the Lord had shut them up” (v.30).

Moving on, in Matthew Chapter 16 we have Peter’s great confession of faith, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”, followed by the

Lord's lovely, intriguing words, "Blessed art thou ... thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (from vv.16-18).

Debate has long swirled around what the Lord precisely means here by "upon this rock". The most likely explanation is Jesus' play on two Greek words: "petros", "Peter", meaning a small bit of rock; and "petra", a sizeable rock, both Greek words deriving from the Aramaic word "kepha", that is Cephas, Peter's actual name. If this understanding is correct, Jesus is saying that the "rock" on which Jesus will build His Church is the truth that Jesus is indeed "the Son of the living God", the revelation of which lies behind Peter's confession of faith; and that Peter himself is akin to "a chip off this great rock-block" of divine truth, in which Peter will indeed have an important role to play in its proclamation.

The Lord Jesus Christ remains "a stumblingstone and rock of offence" to Israel and Judah (Romans 9.33, from Isaiah 8.14), and now to many others as well, because He stands so firmly in the pathway of all human sin and pride with His oh-so-plain message, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no man comes to the Father, but by me" (from John 14.6). In the face of extreme weather events, continuing Covid and growing violence, why, oh why do the world leaders wilfully ignore mankind's complete dependence upon Almighty God, self-revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer? Their stubbornness surely explains the Lord's current chastisings, warnings and looming judgments.

We know from Matthew 7.24-27 that he who hears and obeys Jesus' words has his life-house built upon the Rock; and he who hears but ignores Jesus' words has his life-house built upon the sand – with results that are predictable, obvious and ultimately tragic. So, when confronted with Jesus' words, this is the choice facing all among whom we live.

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15.58).

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