

Lent 2, St Stephen's.

25th Feb 2018.

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Before the opening verse in our Gospel reading, Jesus had asked his disciples, 'Who do you say I am? Peter answered, 'you are the Christ.' In Matthew's Gospel after the confession of Christ by Peter, Jesus said, 'blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.' Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Yet when Peter takes Jesus aside and to rebuke him he is not led by the Holy Spirit but thinks like any human being who wants to protect his friend. Just like Peter we Christians can at times be inspired by the Holy Spirit, but at other times think like everybody else does. When Jesus says get behind me Satan he does not mean that Peter is possessed by Satan, but that, like Satan, Peter is trying to stop Jesus doing what God the Father wants him to do.

What about what the Lord wants us to do? Jesus says, 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' Lent gives us an opportunity to think afresh about our commitment to our Lord. It is a season for repentance. To repent means to change the way we think as well as changing the way we behave. Self denial includes not giving in to the wrong way of thinking. We resist worldly ways of thought and ask for the grace of God to think as a Christian led by the Holy Spirit. We are to think in a godly way. Proverbs 3, 5 says, 'trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

Spiritual truths are spiritually discerned. Both in the Scriptures and in the tradition of the church the truth has been handed down from one generation to another. The word tradition means to hand down or pass on. We have a responsibility not only to receive the faith but also to pass on the Christian gospel and teaching. Like St. Peter we can be led by the Holy Spirit or by the Spirit of the age. Follow the church's traditional teaching not new ideas which others say are OK. Take the bible more seriously in an age when the authority of scripture is challenged even within the church.

The word of God is a light to our path. All scripture is God breathed and written for our learning. Today we can learn from Abraham just as St Paul used him as an example for the church in Rome. We are put right with God through Jesus. That is the basis of our Christian faith. Our tradition and scripture emphasise that Jesus is the only source of salvation for humanity.

There is a heresy called 'indifferentism' which holds that all religions are equally pleasing to God; one religion is as good as another. This suggests that there is no absolute truth and so denies what Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life. We live in a society where, even within the church, our faith and our tradition are being challenged. So, I emphasise what Paul writes about Abraham in verse 20: 'no distrust made him waiver concerning the promises of God, but he grew stronger in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.' What an encouragement that is for us too. No distrust in what we have heard and believed by faith; no questioning of the truth of the gospel; no distrust, no compromise.

Hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints. God wants us to pass on to others the unique truth of our faith. That means making no compromise to the prevailing, powerful and insidious ideas of our present culture. This Lent make sure that you guard your soul. Put on the whole armour of God. Hold up the shield of faith to quench the fiery darts of the evil one, the father of lies. Put on the helmet of salvation to protect your mind and thoughts from the blows of error and lies. Wield the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Grow stronger in faith. Glorify God in your thoughts, words and actions.

Amen.