

Who do you say I am?

My sister and I helped my father build a garage when I was 8 years old... well, maybe it was more like we tormented him when he wasn't giving us things to do that we believed were very helpful – like counting and fetching nails. My dad was a carpenter and an expert on cement. He knew how to build. This garage had strong foundations dug deep into the earth: no corners cut, making a base like the most dependable, weather withstanding rock.

When Simon answered Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus re-christened him 'Peter', meaning rock and said, "On this rock I will build my church, and death itself will not have any power over it."

And we have heard this many times, yet I would like to explore a wider interpretation. The original Greek used the words Petra for rock, on this rock, and ekklēsia (ἐκκλησία), which literally means an assembly, gathering, or a "called-out" group of people; we translate this as church. The thing is both of these words are feminine... and Peter was most certainly a man, and this would have been significant. What could it mean? Is the rock Peter, or something else, or both? What if Jesus meant that the rock of the church is the knowledge that Jesus is the son of the living God? And what if, at the same time, a creature of flesh and blood who is open to God's wisdom can also be a rock? So that divine knowledge and enfleshed belief and openness to Jesus together may be the rock where Jesus will build his church... anywhere that Jesus finds it.

And here is Peter, in the middle of Matthew 16, living in this knowledge and love of Jesus, yet by the end of the chapter he seems to forget who Jesus is and tells him to stop talking nonsense about dying in Jerusalem.

This turning towards and away from God seems to be the natural movement of our lives, this struggle to stay orientated to Jesus, to build the true foundation without cutting corners is the ongoing challenge God created within each of us.

In Ignatian spirituality it is expressed by the concept of Consolation and Desolation... which had specific meaning to Ignatius of Loyola. I am sharing words from Vinita Hampton Wright, a Chicago author, editor, spiritual director and teacher of Ignatian spirituality.

We dwell in a state of consolation when we are moving toward God's active presence in the world, recognising who Jesus is. We know we are moving in this way when we sense the growth of love or faith or mercy or hope - or any of the gifts of the Spirit. If I am becoming more kind with people, and I experience this movement as life-giving and Christlike, I am in a state of consolation.

Consolation can hold many emotions and experiences. Consolation does not mean that we feel constantly happy or at peace. In fact, sometimes when we are doing precisely what God is leading us to do, we might feel negative pressure from others, or we might find the experience a challenge because we're growing and learning. Yet if we sense in our spirit that we are going the right way, this spiritual reality consoles us whether the day is bumpy or smooth.

We are in a state of desolation when we are moving away from God's active presence in the world. We know we are moving in this way when we sense the growth of resentment, ingratitude, selfishness, doubt, fear, pride and so on. If my outlook becomes increasingly gloomy and self-obsessed, I am in a state of desolation. I am resisting God or, if not actively resisting, I am being led away from God by other influences.

Desolation also holds many emotions and experiences. If we are in desolation, we might try to alleviate the discomfort by drinking too much or seeking distraction through more work or social events or buying more clothes or gadgets or holidays or eating chocolate. The food and drink and activity might feel quite good, but they are not leading us to greater joy, peace, and love, they are fleeting. In fact, "false" consolations can help us avoid the true consolation of God's presence.

And how do we move back? Worship, community, thoughtful prayer, all of those activities which bring us each closer to God.

So it is our responsibility, each one of us, to develop the self-awareness and the closeness to God necessary to seek and remain in consolation. No one will do it for us, but Jesus will do it with us. It's what we are doing right here, right now.

This steering of our own individual ship is important because together we are the house, the church, that Jesus built and continues to build on the rock.

And what does this house need? All of us, the living stones of this church, all of us, in or moving toward consolation. All of us together living out the life, the love of Christ. And we don't need to

shout this from the rooftops, our enfleshed love, lived love, proclaims who Jesus is, moment by moment by moment.

Jesus said, 'Don't tell anyone I am the Messiah...' Don't tell, perhaps simply be the message... maybe if we just act it out, live it out all will know we are his disciples in that love one for another, and will see Jesus' face in our very countenance and we in theirs.

It is in how we behave that people in our community come to know who Jesus is. When we are at the fridge, when we are serving coffee on Tuesday, when we volunteer... it is more about how we do what we do, than what we actually do.

When we welcome, when we baptise, when we hold mourners in a funeral, when we walk through the difficult times in love and gentleness as a church... this is how we proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, because if we aren't doing this, than all the words in the world can make no difference, can radiate no love, can transform no one.

So, in this moment are we in consolation, abiding in Christ, or desolation, abiding in distraction or sin? Who is Jesus to you this morning? Let's use this meditative time listening to our anthem to discern our own answers and where God would lead us.

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