

Then get on with it - Pentecost 13/23

There is a lot of talk about the Greek and Aramaic used in this passage from the gospel, concerning whether the words for 'Peter' and 'rock' are the same or different in their meaning. The argument arises from the fact that Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi, and there is a huge rock escarpment there that has a cave beneath it, dedicated to the pagan god, Pan. The suggestion is that Jesus is saying to Peter, 'You are a small rock (indeed, the word used in the Aramaic is for a 'pebble') and, or rather, but upon this huge rock and its shrine to Pan will I build my church.' The traditional teaching is that the

Greek word is Petros for Peter, and Petra for the rock.

At the end of the day, does it matter? Well, it's one of those things that the Roman Catholics get all hung up on, because they say it proves the importance of the apostolic succession - which is never referred to anywhere in the bible. But there you are. That's why I'm not going to preach on it - because it is of no importance.

Rather I am going to jump into play with my old friend Paul in Romans.

On Thursday, as some of you know, we now have a Morning Prayer at 1230, and we read

the set lectionary passages for the day. I think it's a nice little service and only takes 20 minutes of your day - just saying.

This Thursday we had a passage from *Genesis* in which Jacob has his dream of a ladder reaching into heaven. However, it is the reassurance that he gets from God that I think is important. In verse 15 of the 28th chapter, we read, 'I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go,' which recalled to me the almost identical words that God spoke to Joshua, when he had to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land after the death of Moses. Here Joshua must have been feeling somewhat dismayed at the thought of leading the rabble of Israel, with whom Moses

had had such a hard time, and probably not really feeling up to the task, but the word of God comes to him, 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

We are not told in so many words that Joshua is feeling anxious, but by the many repeated exhortations and encouragements that fill the entire first chapter of the book of Joshua, one can only surmise that God knew Joshua was feeling just a teensy bit challenged.

What we have in our Romans reading is also a significant challenge.

Let's suppose for a moment that I bought a new car - I have to admit that I know nothing at all about how cars work; I had a vague idea about the working of the internal combustion engine once - it went something like, 'suck, push, bang, blow, - which I thought was something you shouldn't really talk about in polite society, but someone told me that was a four-stroke cycle, which didn't really make it a whole lot clearer. I hate to think what a two-stroke or rotary engine does.

Let me digress for a moment and take you back to South Africa, where I had a lovely BMW cruiser motor bike. One of the lady

assistants at the garage I bought it from told me this story;...

But the point is this - the guy who bought his car didn't know how to use its functions, and I would expect all functions to work without me knowing how.

So if I found that the radio didn't work, or the speedometer didn't work or transmission, or whatever didn't work, I would have a useless and functionless vehicle.

In the same way, if I bought a wonderful new Swiss penknife with 18 different tools on it, or perhaps a Leatherman for my grandson, and none of the blades or levers would come out of the body, like they were glued in and unusable

- what functional value would that present be to Ben or Luc? All those features - and none of them accessible? Pointless, literally.

In the same way again, we - you and I - are constructed as human beings with a myriad of functions - our Romans reading says, 'For just as each of us has one body with many members, ...these members do not all have the same function,'

So if we have eyes but can't see, or legs and can't walk, or a gut, but cannot digest, or a mouth but can't speak, or a brain but no thoughts - you get the picture? We are disabled in one or more ways, and deficient in our ability to function properly as God intended. And this is important for more than

just us, as individuals, because our reading goes on to say, '...so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.'

Thus, my functioning as a human being affects you, and your functioning as you are supposed to affects me and all of us in return. But only if you are actually functioning. If you are not functioning as you are supposed to be, then you are really just a waste of oxygen - sorry, but it's true!

If you bought a car that didn't work, it would just be a heap of scrap metal - after all, a Rolls-Royce with no gas in the tank is just a heap of expensive junk.

That's where the challenge comes in to today's message, because Paul goes on to say that 'We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us,' and how many times have you heard me say to you that your job is to discern what your gift is?

But of course it goes much further than that, because you are still a BMW in 'P' for 'paralysed' mode, stuck in the garage.

Paul doesn't mince his words, he says, 'If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do

it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.'

In other words, find out what your gift is, then use it! Don't stay stuck in the garage in P for 'paralysed' mode!

Remember the parable of the talents; how the master of the house went away on a trip, and before he left he gave five talents to one of his servants, two to another, and one to a third.

Just to put this into something you can relate to, a talent was worth 6,000 denarii, and a denarius was the usual wage for one day's labour. Therefore, a talent was the equivalent of about 20 years of labour.

The story goes that the man with 5 talents invested them and made five more, similarly, the man with two made two more, but the man with one talent was scared, knowing his master to be a hard man, and buried his talent in the ground - and then handed it back.

A bit like saying, 'Yes, I know you told me I could drive the Rolls, but I didn't want to risk it getting scratched, so I locked it up in the garage; here's the key.'

Who benefits from that? We have gifts to use - not hide or lock away. We read in 1 Corinthians 12 that no one part of the body is any more or less important than another; 'If the whole body were an eye, how could it hear?

If the whole body were an ear, how could it smell? God has placed each part in the body just as he wanted it to be. If all the parts were the same, how could there be a body? '

And I know that some of you will be thinking, 'What have I got that is of any use at all?'

Yes, we all go through the 'I am not worthy' journey - and some of us quite like to get stuck in it, because it means we won't have to do anything.

But have I got news for you! Paul covers that eventuality as well, so even if you think you are the last sphincter in the digestive tract, listen to what Paul says on that; 'The eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you!" The head can't

say to the feet, "I don't need you!" In fact, it is just the opposite. The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are the ones we can't do without.

The parts that we think are less important we treat with special honour. The private parts aren't shown. But they are treated with special care. The parts that can be shown don't need special care. But God has put together all the parts of the body. And he has given more honour to the parts that didn't have any. In that way, the parts of the body will not take sides.'

And as I said previously, now that we have some idea of how our Rolls or BMW works, and

have got the hang of what all the buttons and levers do, we have to press, flick, and lever them!

Paul says again, 'All of them will take care of one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.'

Let me move away from the car analogy for a moment to something that I do know a little about - music. Here we will readily appreciate that if Mozart had composed a beautiful symphony and brings it to an orchestra, but only the violins and tympani play, it's going to sound pretty awful. It doesn't take the brains of an archbishop to realize that we need all the instruments of the orchestra to make the

piece sound as it should. That is why Paul said at the end of his dissertation on the body, 'You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it.'

That is an honour you cannot dismiss as trivial. Therefore, you have your own special gift - discerning it is the first task - however small and demeaning you think it is, it is still essential to the whole body of Christ.

And then use it - for God's sake, use it!