

Pentecost 2014
St Peters Pretoria 125 Jubilee

John 20,21f: "Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

And

Mt 16, 13ff: When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18 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. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Dear sisters and brothers,

"What is in a name?" - Some people believe that the meaning of your name influences how you become. Parents might chose a name as a message for their child, a wish, a blessing. It might tells a story of their birth.

My name is Horst. It comes from "shrub" or "thicket" or "eagles nest". Judging by the state of my office desk, my name clearly influenced my personality.

This congregation bears the Name of Peter, disciple of Jesus. He was the leading disciple, which of course can make one feel proud about the name. But Peter also had his less glamorous sides. He was the courageous one, who said: Lord, call me, and I will walk on water to you! But the next moment he cried out, sinking, "Lord, help me!"

He was the courageous, bold follower who promised: "Even if every one abandons you, I WILL NOT!" - and a few hours later he fled, crying, after having betrayed Jesus three times.

Peter was a man with vision: He wanted to build huts at a good place, to live, where it is good to be. He also was willing to act after receiving the less pleasant vision from heaven, to go and visit the "unclean gentiles".

But he also was the one to doubt. At his first encounter with Jesus he could not see

why he should throw out the nets if there clearly are no fish to catch.

Much later he was challenged by Paul, because he refused to eat with gentiles, having forgotten about the vision that through Christ no human being is unclean.

Looking at the 125 years of this congregation, it also is a story of opposites, of bright moments, and times of shadow.

It is a story of dedicated people who, almost 130 years ago, dreamt of an own congregation, and who were willing to sacrifice much to make it happen. Yet, at the same time, for others the main motivator was not outreach to the German community, but resistance to continue to celebrate in the churchbuilding of the Black congregation in Burgerspark.

It is the story of a young, vibrant congregation, that doubled it's numbers in the first few years, but then also shrank again, not only because of World War one, but also due to lack of commitment of the members, as lamented about by the first pastor, Grünberger.

This lack of commitment and other factors also resulted in a vacancy lasting for 36 years, where services were held only once a month by care-taker missionaries. This must have been quite demoralising for the active core group.

And it is a story of growth, almost a rebirth from 1957 onwards, with the congregation growing to just under 3000 members. Even the new large Church, dedicated in 1965, soon was too small to accommodate all the worshippers.

It is a story of courage, when a new congregation was planted, knowing that such a Church planting will take a heavy toll - halving the membership, and releasing a large portion of young families to the new Johannes congregation. It was like stepping on water - and then shouting: Lord, help, we are sinking!

It is the story of a congregation leading the way: When many congregations were still debating whether women should be allowed to speak and vote at the AGM, St Peters congregational council already had 8 women amongst it's twenty church councillors. (1962)

It is a story of a congregation that already in the 50's and 60's started to have Services in Afrikaans or English. But for a long time it did not really warm up to the idea. Also in this respect it reminds me of Peter. He obeys Christ's call to go to the heathen. But upon entering the house of Cornelius after three days journey he does not greet the gentiles with: "Praise the Lord - he has called me to cross these boundaries, and I am willing to follow", but with: "You know that I am not supposed to be here. It is against my tradition. The only reason why I came is because God told me so. So, here I am. What do you want" (Own summary of Acts 10,28ff). Does that sound like a pleasant, willing visitor? Is that not how many non-Germans experienced their first welcome with St Peters: "We know that we should be open to all. But we do not like the idea because it goes against our tradition! We

only do it because God wants us to. So, what do you want?"

Yes, St Peter's congregation in many ways followed in the steps of St Peter the apostle and lived up to its name - and down to his name!

It is good to know that we do not need to keep quiet about the things that were not so good. The New Testament is very open about the shortcomings of Peter. We too can acknowledge the problematic issues. We are Church in this world, consisting of humans with our dreams and fears, our faith and our doubts. We sometimes are proud "Peters" and at others have to bow our head in shame.

BUT - Why does Jesus call and engage such characters to build his Church?

The two texts that I read at the beginning give us a clue.

The highest authority is to forgive, or not to forgive, sins. Matthew speaks about the keys to unlock and lock heaven. Wow - this is huge!

How can fallible people who have their up's and down's receive such authority?

The secret lies in the little sentence: "Jesus blew on them: ... Receive the Holy Spirit" Jesus does not abdicate his authority, does not give his followers a blank cheque. Rather, through his Spirit, he makes us instruments of his mercy, channels for his salvation. As his followers through the Holy Spirit we share in his authority to do his work.

Time and again Christians claim to have the authority all by themselves. Often it is only history that reveals that it was not Christ's authority that guided them, but their own desires, urge for power, and stubbornness.

Pentecost does not mean that Jesus cuts us loose to do as we wish, but rather that he "blows on us", calls us into his service, promises to guide and to lead us, so that we can become his messengers. We are not cut loose but drawn in!

Our authority does not lie in our character, in our abilities, in our goodness. It lies in our calling, and in the fact that Jesus promises to be with us and work through us!

The second text, from Matthew 16, refers to Peter, the Rock, and contains the promise of Jesus: on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it.

Peter, the Rock- the shaken, broken, bold and bouncing rock surely cannot be a good foundation? Well, he is not. Because Jesus does not call the character of Peter "Rock", but the testimony that he gave: You are the Christ (Messiah) the son of the living God!

Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church, the Rock, and not even hell is stronger and bigger than Christ, Son of God!

Our task is not to find strong people on which Church can be built, but to proclaim to the world that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour, the son of God.

This proclamation is the foundation, on which the Church is built!

Whenever Peter lost this focus, things started to go wrong. "Lord, I will defend you, no matter what". First of all he cuts off a soldier's ear, and then he denies Jesus and flees. That is the human, crumbling rock.

But after Easter Jesus Christ calls him back, re-commissions him, instructs him to shepherd the flock. It is Christ, the solid rock, who builds the Church - with Peter, through Peter, and often despite of Peter!

Dear sisters and brothers,

St Peter's congregation is an important part of our Church. It still is the biggest congregation. It is also the only one offering services in three languages every Sunday. Hardly any congregation is as diverse. It is the only one with two pastor's posts. It has the largest representation at Synod. Like its patron, it is a leader.

And yet, like Peter, it is also constantly facing challenges, seemingly being tossed about.

Today as we celebrate 125 years, we again learn from Peter. Our strength does not lie in our size or eloquence or wealth - but in our testimony to the city: Here is the Christ, the son of the living God!

Our future does not lie in our success to create harmony and a lovable atmosphere, but in our willingness to be "breathed on" by the Holy Spirit, to forgive and be forgiven, to accept and be accepted.

Our fellowship does not always start with a "Halleluja, Praise the Lord", but perhaps with a "God has told us to meet - so, here we are". May we, through his Holy Spirit, time and again experience how the reluctant reaching out to others, moving out of our tradition and comfort zone, leads us to the joy of being part of his wonderful Church. May we time and again grasp something of his promise that the gates of hell are weaker than our Lord. May we find the courage to steer and be guided through difficult times.

We will remain fallible humans. Jesus remains the Christ, the victor. He continues to call us, to blow on us his Spirit, to send us out to be part of his mission. The gates of Hell will not overcome him!

Amen

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My story with St Peter's:

Baptised in the old church in 1958,

Confirmed in the new Church in 1971

Ordained here 30 years ago - 1984

Pastor 5 years ago.

My induction as bishop did not take place here - but the organ that played at my baptism in St Peter's played at my induction in the Northrand Congregation - so even there the link existed!