

**Title: Rise the Heights**  
**Text: Matthew 16:13-18**  
**Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron**  
**Date: 6 March, 2011**

Our text today is drawn from Matthew's gospel, chapter 16, reading from verse 13.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 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. 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.  
(Matthew 16:13-18)

Where I want to focus this morning is on verse 18. After Peter, inspired with divine insight, declares Jesus' true identity as the Son of God, Jesus responds with this affirmation:

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.  
(Matthew 16:18)

This is one of the most important verses in the gospels for a whole range of reasons. It is significant in that it offers the first of only two occasions where Jesus refers to the church. By contrast, in the rest of the New Testament there are 116 references to 'church'.

The Greek word translated as church is 'ecclesia'. Ecclesia literally means 'called out' or 'summoned forth'.

The origin of ecclesia is not religious at all, but political. It dates back 500 years before Christ when Greece began to revolutionize the ancient world with its philosophy, culture and politics. In Athens the ecclesia was a democratic assembly of citizens open to all men over the age of 18 years. Amongst other things, the ecclesia was 'called out' to appoint magistrates, approve legislation, and decide when the country would wage war or declare peace. The ecclesia of Athens numbered up to 43,000 people and required a quorum of 6,000 members before it could make any decisions. It would meet on a hill overlooking Athens called the pnyx. The ecclesia met weekly, and so important was attendance, when it was in session a group of Scythian slaves would go through the streets of Athens with ropes dipped in red dye and lash any citizen who was not attending the ecclesia. (That's one way to get people to attend church!)

If we fast forward 500 years to the time of Jesus, the ecclesia was a governing body of people 'called out' by the Roman Empire when they incorporated a conquered country or region into the empire. The ecclesia would be subject to the direction and overall authority of the Emperor. Members of the ecclesia would declare their allegiance to Caesar as their Lord. Their role was to institute and implement the will of Rome. Their ultimate allegiance was to Caesar, who was their Lord.

And so Jesus tells Peter that he is the rock on which he will build his ecclesia. The ecclesia of Jesus – the church of Jesus Christ -is made up of those he has called out and summoned forth to be his governing body through which he will establish God's reign on earth. Caesar is not our Lord. Jesus is our Lord. The Kingdom we seek to establish is not of this world but seeks to transform this world.

We are the called out ones. We have been summoned forth by Jesus. Which begs a couple of questions, what have we been called out from and what are we summoned forth to do?

First, I believe we are called out from **Apathy about Injustice**

When Jesus entered the temple courts in Jerusalem he was enraged by the merchants who exploited the poor in the Court of Gentiles by selling sacrificial animals at inflated prices and exchanged foreign coins at ridiculous exchange rates. Jesus turns over the tables and scatters the thieves. This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. He hates injustice. God hates injustice.

It follows that those of who claim the name of Christ will likewise become obsessed with seeing injustice overturned. God calls us out from apathy and into action to see God's justice and peace reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Bob Pierce was the founder of World Vision. This ministry was born out of Pierce's combination of compassion for poor children and anger at injustice. He famously prayed:

May my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.  
(Bob Pierce)

It is normal for a Christian to be moved with compassion for the poor. It is normal for a follower of Jesus to be angered about injustice and want to do something about it.

Bill Hybels talks about the old cartoon character Popeye. Remember him? Popeye was a sailor who loved Olive Oil and who had superhuman strength when he ate spinach. Popeye had many famous sayings. Perhaps the most famous was when he was confronted with some injustice towards himself or others. When this happened, he would say:

'That's all I can stand. I can't stand no more!'

Then he would then eat a can of spinach, grow shirt popping biceps and right the wrong as only Popeye could.

Followers of Jesus will have 'I can't stand no more' moments. When we witness injustice, we will not sit on the sidelines in apathetic silence. We have been called out and summoned forth to usher in no less than God's justice on earth.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther was a priest who saw corruption and heresy rife in the church. He said, 'I can't stand no more!' and nailed 95 theses to the church door and so the Protestant reformation began.

William Wilberforce saw and smelled the horror of the slave ships docked in London. He could stand no more and dedicated his life to abolishing slavery.

Martin Luther King Junior experienced firsthand the de-humanizing effects of segregation. He could stand no more and so gave his life for the Civil Rights movement.

A tiny Albanian nun travelled to the slums of Calcutta and saw the so-called untouchables dying in squalor. Mother Theresa gave her life to serving the poor.

The Bible tells us:

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.  
(Proverbs 31:8)

It is my growing conviction that every generation, indeed every Christian, is called out and summoned forth to speak up for those with no voice, to embody God's justice in a world marked still by too much injustice. German theologian Karl Barth has said:

The church with no great anguish on its heart has no great music on its lips.  
(Karl Barth)

Apathy about injustice is not an option. Silence is unacceptable.

Second, I believe we are called out from **Indifference concerning Others**

One of Jesus' most confronting stories is about the so-called Good Samaritan. A man travels from Jerusalem to Jericho and is beaten, robbed and left for dead. Two men, a priest and a Levite, see the dying man but go out of their way to avoid him by crossing to the other side. It's a Samaritan man, an enemy of the Jews, who stops and care for him with life-transforming compassion. One of the many shocks of this story is it is the religious men who ignore the man's plight. They are the ones who see him and yet keep on walking.

We live in a self-obsessed, narcissistic, pleasure seeking culture. The culture defining narrative we are told from birth to the grave that we are the centre of our universe. But the church – the ecclesia of God – is called out from such self obsession and summoned by Jesus into a life of service.

The story of the Good Samaritan is shocking. We find it difficult to comprehend the callous disregard of the priest and Levite for the dying man. But sometimes I wonder if I, if we, are any different?

All around us in our city are men and women drowning in depression and despair.

All around us are young and old people alike addicted to drugs and alcohol or slaves to materialism.

In our streets and neighborhoods are friends drifting through life with a nagging sense of purposelessness.

We are surrounded by people staring down the barrel of spiritual death.

How can we be indifferent to their plight?

We are called out from indifference to others and summoned forth to speak God's word of salvation to those who are spiritually dying.

Third, I believe we are called out from **Carelessness regarding Sin**

Sin is the severing of our relationship with God through rebellious thought and acts. The Bible teaches, and simple observation of a world marked by conflict large and small confirms, that we are all sinners.

What we have become experts at is ignoring sin and its consequences. Tragically, this includes the church. We do this in all sorts of creative ways.

We rationalize our sin by comparing ourselves with others. I may do the wrong thing, but she does far worse.

We accommodate sin by elevating the self above God. No one has the right, including God, to tell me what to do!

We minimize our sin. After all it was just a little lie; no one got hurt, that's the main thing.

We ignore sin, pretending it never really happened, or if it did, it was no big deal.

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We give in to sin. We don't seem to be able to break its power, so why bother trying.

In the end, we embrace sin. Our sinful practice and our sinful nature become normal – it is how things are. And so without acknowledging it, we have become a slave to sin.

Whether we try to rationalize it, accommodate it, minimize it, ignore it or in the end give in and embrace it – none of this changes the fact that God hates sin!

God hates the curse of death that unredeemed sin encumbers us with.

God hates the consequences of sin that fractures lives and relationships.

God hates the addictive nature of sin that enslaves us.

God hates the deceit of sin that blinds us with darkness.

God hates sin and he calls his church – his ecclesia – out from it. He summons us forth to wage war against sin that seeks to enslave us. He enlists us in a lifelong battle that in his resurrection power we will win!

We cannot be care-less about sin. We must wage war on it. If you think I am being over the top, consider Jesus' words:

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out...and if your right eye causes you to sin, cut it off.  
(Matthew 5:29-30)

Is Jesus suggesting the church should be full of half blind amputees? No. But he is saying we should be deadly serious and committed to waging war on sin that seeks to rob us of life.

Here is my conviction. In many ways we have given up the fight. And so the church has become a pale imitation of what it is called out to be. But it does not need to be this way!

Stronger than my conviction is the good news of the gospel. Jesus has broken once and for all the curse of sin with his death on the cross. His atoning sacrifice means we need not face the consequences of sin. Even more, his resurrection power is available to all who believe. This power, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, is the weapon that will defeat even the darkest and most habitual of sins. The battle will be hard, the fight will be tough and the war will last a life time. But the war will be won. In fact the war has been won!

So here is my prayer for me and our church:

- That by the Holy Spirit, God would CONVICT us of our sin and our need for forgiveness.
- That with that conviction, God would lead us to a point of CONFESSION and REPENTANCE where we bring into the light all we have tried to hide and ignore and turn to God.
- That, upon confession, we will experience the liberating RENEWAL that comes as we experience forgiveness and grace.
- That established again on a firm foundation, in the Holy Spirit's power, we will live lives of VICTORY as day by day we put to death sin that seeks to rob us of life.

John Wesley famously said:

Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God...they alone will shake the gates of hell.

(John Wesley)

The church of God should be a hell-shaking community! Too much is at stake for us to pussyfoot around in a delusional stupor pretending that close enough is good enough.

We are called out from spiritual mediocrity.

Lukewarm religion is not an option.

God did not give his son for us so we could wallow around in our sinful rebellion.

We were bought with a price.

We were rescued for a purpose. And so, as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. (2 Corinthians 7:1)

We are the ecclesia of God. We are the called out ones.

Jesus has called us out from apathy about injustice.

Jesus has called us out from indifference concerning others.

Jesus has called us out from carelessness regarding sin.

We are called out and we have been summoned forth. For what purpose? The Apostle Peter wrote to a small ecclesia of God somewhere in what we know as modern day Turkey. He told them this:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession...

You are God's called out ones. He goes on to say what they have summoned forth to do:

... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.  
(1 Peter 2:9)

The ecclesia of God – the church of Jesus Christ – has its one and only purpose to declare the glory of God. This glory is demonstrated fully and completely in the Cross of Christ.

Every opportunity we take to speak out in the name of Jesus against injustice is declaring the praise and glory of God.

Every opportunity we take to tell others about Jesus is declaring the praise and glory of God.

Every opportunity we take to walk away from sin and temptation is declaring the praise and glory of God.

Jesus told Peter the gates of Hell would not prevail against his called out one – his ecclesia – his church. Everything else might crumble and fall, but the church of God will prevail until the end when Jesus comes again.

The ecclesia – the called out ones – the church of Jesus Christ – is an unstoppable force.

Erwin McManus once took his kids to a wildlife park. As they rode through the park, a guide pointed out the unique features of the different species that we encountered. The guide had some fun pointing out the collective nouns of various creatures.

For example, bees come in swarms, and ants congregate as colonies. Whales travel together as pods and fish swim together in schools. You have flocks of birds and herds of cattle. Then there are the disturbing ones, like a murder of crows and an ambush of tigers.

A group of buzzards waiting around together to feast on leftover road-kill is called a committee. Isn't that a cracker!

Then there are rhinos. You may not know this, but rhinos can run thirty miles an hour, which is pretty amazing. There is just one problem with this remarkable speed. You see, rhinos can see only thirty feet in front of them. Can you imagine something that large moving together as a group, charging ahead at thirty miles an hour with no idea what's at thirty-one feet? With that scary looking horn pointing the way, rhinos run forward full steam ahead without apprehension, which leads us to their name.

Rhinos moving together at full speed are known as a crash! Think about it, even when they're just wallowing around in muddy water, they're called a crash because of their potential.

You've got to love that. That is what the church is meant to be – a crash. We are the called out ones, those summoned forth by Jesus out of darkness into light. With Christ as our head and the Holy Spirit as our fuel, we become an unstoppable force. We don't have to pretend we know the future. Who cares that we can see only thirty feet ahead? Whatever's at thirty-one feet needs to care that we're coming and better get out of the way!

Moving together as God's people – his ecclesia – we become the human version of the rhino crash.

Our future is uncertain – scary even. I'd love to be able to peer six months into the future and see if we have enough money to extend our building here at Robina and if we even have a building to meet in for our new campus. But I can't look that far ahead. And that is how it should be. You see, we walk by faith and not by sight.

And so we can move forward with confidence. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, as we live lives bathed in his grace and power, nothing will prevail against us; nothing will stop us.

We need to stop wasting our time and stop being afraid of what we cannot see and do not know. We need to move forward full force because of what we do know – God is with us. As we do, God will do amazing things in and through us.

Norway in 1942 was occupied by Hitler's army. A puppet government had been installed and any dissent was crushed mercilessly. The Norwegian state church was taken over by a Norwegian Fascist called Vidkun Quisling. He declared that from that point forward the church would be based on race and allegiance to Hitler. Bishops and priests were outraged. On Easter Sunday 1942, 11,000 priests resigned their office in protest. There were 40 priests who remained in their positions.

And so on Easter Sunday, with no priests and with the German occupiers outraged, churches were closed across the country. The highest and holiest day of the year and churches were closed. In one town, people gathered on Easter morning on the cobbled steps of the town square under the watchful eye of SS troops. People did not know what to do. The air was thick with anger and tension and frustration. Then someone began to sing, and soon everyone was singing the hymns of their faith. And as they sang, they felt their faith and confidence grow. The singing was an expression of worship and act of defiance all at the same time.

Soon singing was not enough. People began to march the short distance towards their locked and barricaded church. As they marched they sang the great hymn of the Protestant Reformation penned by Martin Luther:

A mighty fortress is our God

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A sure defence and weapon  
He'll help us out of every need  
Whatever now may happen...

The march was led by their priest and elders, but also towards the front of the throng were children and even a heavily pregnant woman. As they got closer to the church they continued to sing even louder. The SS troops became agitated by this open act of defiance. Their captain was enraged. He quickly ordered his troops to block the march's way, which they did. And so the singing crowd was confronted by loaded guns. The captain pointed his pistol at the pregnant woman and yelled with venom in his voice, 'One more step and she is the first to die!'

The crowd went quiet. Eyes dropped and shoulders slumped. Retreat seemed inevitable. And then after what seemed like minutes, but was really only seconds, a lone voice started to sing again:

With our own strength is nothing done  
Soon we are lost, dejected  
But for us fights the rightful Man  
Whom God himself elected  
You ask, "Who may this be?"  
Christ Jesus it is he...

Soon the whole congregation – the whole ecclesia - for that is what it was, was singing again. Who was that lone voice? Who would take such a risk? Who would risk the life of the pregnant woman and her unborn child and indeed the lives of everyone present?

It was the pregnant woman herself who was that lone, courageous voice who, in the company of others, found the strength to stare down the forces of evil and so declare the praises of him who called her and all of us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Newlife, you are the ecclesia of God. You are called out and summoned forth by Jesus Christ. You have been summoned forth for a purpose – to declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. With God before, behind, beside and in you – nothing can prevail against you, not even the gates of hell!