

THE LORD IS MY ROCK

Readings: Rom 8:31-39; Lk 1:39-47

When you look at this Grotto, what you see is a massive, immovable rock. The rock is so strong that, directly above us, the great bulk of the upper basilica rests firmly and comfortably on it.



We know that our lives and our expectations are not like solid rock; in fact one of the reasons why we come here on pilgrimage is because we feel weak and uncertain. We come with our illnesses, our needs and hopes, and our sorrows. Some of us have come feeling fragile and weak and afraid of what the future holds. We come with anxieties and responsibilities that drain our strength and our resources. Unlike the rock, which effortlessly bears the weight of the basilica, we often feel ready to crack, weighed down beyond our strength.

Looking at this Grotto we see a striking image of the theme of this year's pilgrimage: *The Lord is my Rock*. The Chosen People used the idea of rock as a great image of the reliability and strength of God: "God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall never be shaken" (Ps 62:2). For them life was often very uncertain, they were surrounded by enemies, but they knew that, however difficult things became, they were in the hands of God who loved them and cared for them.

St Paul knew that nothing could come between us and the love of Christ: not trouble or worry, or hunger or persecution. He knew that we can triumph even over the worst suffering by the power of him who loved us.

Life is uncertain and sometimes cruel. If it were up to us to make ourselves happy by our own efforts, we would certainly fail. We cannot control illness and misfortune and death. The Grotto reminds us of what we have come here to remember – that we can rely on the strength and the love of God our Rock. "Neither death nor life... nothing that exists, nothing still to come... nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Grotto reminds us of that not just because it is made of solid rock. In fact, at the bottom of the rock, just where you would expect all the weight to be anchored to the ground, is this little cave, an empty space; the rock hangs in the air above our heads; there doesn't appear to be anything here to hold up the basilica!

The love of God can be at its most powerful where we don't expect to see it at all. In this cave, in this empty space, is where we find the real source of strength and hope. Here, even more clearly than by looking at the great rock towering over us, we see the Lord our rock.

Here the Lady appeared to Bernadette and said, "I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the next." At the Annunciation, she declared that she was the Lord's servant and was willing that everything should be done according to the Lord's word. Simeon warned her that a sword of sorrow would pierce her own soul; she stood at the foot of the cross and saw the horror of the agonised death of her only Son; she saw the people he loved mocking him; she saw him abandoned by most of his chosen disciples. When the Blessed Virgin said that she could not promise Bernadette happiness in this life, she was speaking as one who knew pain and heartbreak herself. But she was blessed because she believed, and continued to believe, even on Calvary, that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.

What Mary teaches us is that it is not enough to *take comfort* in the strength of God's love, symbolised in the rock. We have to *entrust ourselves* to God's love. We have to put our trust in him rather than in ourselves. As Mary stood at the foot of the Cross, she was, like her Son, placing her faith in God beyond every human hope and plan. When Jesus died the cruel and shameful death of crucifixion, all human hope was gone. It was then that the power and love of God could be seen in all its strength and reliability. On Easter day, her faith was vindicated and she saw the love of God, stronger than death or any evil raising her Son from the dead. Once again, in this Grotto, she calls us to believe wholeheartedly and trustingly, as she did.

In this Grotto there is a stone, a rock, which was not here at the time of Bernadette. Here we come not just to an image but to the rock on which all our hope is built. It is the stone which symbolises Jesus Christ, the altar on which we celebrate the Eucharist. In the Mass, we come into the presence of Jesus himself who gave up everything to his Father for us. On the Cross, he gave himself without reserve without any holding back. The Eternal Son of God through whom all things were made was mocked and scourged and cruelly killed by creatures he had made out of nothing. It was an indescribable evil. It was also an act of divine love beyond anything that any human mind could have dared to imagine. His self-sacrifice and his rising to a new life beyond death and suffering, is present to us on this altar.

The Lord is our rock – strong, reliable, solid, unshakeable. But he is a Lord who has suffered. He has known the fragility, the uncertainty, the pain, the disappointment, the cruelty of life. He asks us to trust in his Father's love *as he has already done himself*, even to death on the Cross.

That is why it is possible to come here with hope in the Lord our Rock: "He not only died for us – he rose from the dead, and there at God's right hand he stands and pleads for us". That is why, in spite of our worries and illnesses and responsibilities we can sing with the Blessed Virgin Mary: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my saviour".

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