

Living Stones

Sunday 7 May, 2017

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, Revd Dr Ruth Redpath AO at 6pm Choral Eucharist.

The fourth Sunday of the Easter season, as this is in our church calendar, is often called - with affectionate familiarity - Good Shepherd Sunday, as the gospel on this Sunday each year is taken from the Chapter of John's gospel as Robert has just read, combined with the 23rd Psalm "The Lord is my Shepherd".

That image, of the shepherd who looks after the sheep, keeps them safe in the fold and who also goes out to look for the one who is lost, is a very beautiful and reassuring one. It is not just sheep and shepherds - but bread, water, trees, vines, - things to do with life and nourishment – that are used in the scriptures as images to help us to understand our relationship with God, and with each other.

Tonight, though, we are going to think about stones and rocks and houses and temples – images dominating the passage read earlier by Canon Reilly from Peter's first letter.

Stones however - unyielding and inanimate as they are - **provided** the language to express the hopes of the Jewish people in relation to a building - the temple - for centuries before the time of Jesus.

In those verses from Peter's letter, are several references to stones, five of them in 3 separate quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures. Perhaps we need to offer some explanation to help us engage with what is – overall - one of the most wonderful statements in our scriptures of what it means to be a Christian.

When King David had wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem, he had been promised that his son would build the temple - using stones of course - but that a king who came later from his line would be the one who would complete the building; creating a permanent, eternal temple where God would dwell. That person is spoken of in the first quotation (verse 6). as "a cornerstone, chosen and precious"

Even as that hope was cherished in the following centuries - through all the trials of conquest and exile - at least by some of God's people, the prophets gave hints of some less triumphalist aspects of his coming

A strand of suffering was expressed - alongside the message of hope.

There was a real possibility that the coming king would be rejected.

The stone metaphor was again used. The builders might reject that cornerstone says verse 7 - it mightn't quite fit the shape the builders had in mind. Or it might jut out awkwardly and cause trouble (verse 8).

By the time of Jesus' coming, many had forgotten that caution, rather pinning their hopes on a ruler in the style of the rulers they saw around them, heroic in battle, able to free them from Roman oppression, rebuilding the temple once more with much splendour, at whose magnificence they could rejoice as they experienced afresh God's glory.

Peter - clearly of Jewish background, is writing to those of both Jewish and Gentile origins - and takes this metaphor of stones and buildings and interprets them for his readers somewhat differently; indicating that these promises speak, not of a physical building made up of inanimate stones, however beautifully crafted.

No, far from speaking of a lifeless structure, he talks about a person - someone living.

"Come to Jesus" he encourages them in verse 4. Jesus Christ is alive - as we know and celebrate in this season - **he** is that cornerstone, chosen and precious in God's sight, a LIVING stone. **On him** depends the completion of the new temple - not a physical building in a particular place, but a spiritual building, a spiritual house or household, a new community of faith, where God dwells with his people.

And yes, it was quite true. Jesus **had** been a stumbling block for some – he tripped them up because his demands were too great.

He **was** rejected by mortals. That special stone – the promised Son of God in the line of King David - was discarded by those who should have recognised whom he was. They killed him.

But **the plan was not thwarted** – the building went ahead. One piece was needed to hold the new structure together – the one for the top corner – that last gap having exactly the same shape as the rejected one - the suffering crucified saviour.

In the raising of Jesus from the dead, God demonstrated unequivocally that Jesus Christ was indeed the most important, that crucial stone in the building – the chief cornerstone.

Peter continues the metaphor in an extraordinary fashion. The readers of that day (and we) are invited (in verse 5) to become part of that building, to be living stones ourselves, incorporated into that spiritual house, united with Christ.

At the time of this writing, Christians were hard-pressed. They were a minority, dispossessed religiously and socially, economically and politically, and scattered across present-day Turkey. They were facing persecution and an uncertain future.

We might say that they were facing a crisis of identity.

Those Christians of Jewish background were having to adapt to the changes in their worship from the regular temple practices to a faith and practice centred on Jesus Christ. At the same time they were learning to accept on equal terms those of a Gentile heritage who had also come to faith in Jesus - a huge adjustment of culture, heart and mind.

So where did they belong? Who were they - at this time of individual and societal transition - as a minority group?

Says Peter - They have been given a new identity in Christ. There is a new place for those who feel they have no place – they - all the believers who have tasted that the Lord is good (verse 3).- all who have not rejected the stone nor seen him as a rock to trip over, now belong to a new household, a new community.

Because, says Peter, you have come to the living stone Jesus Christ, I can think of four phrases which describe you. You are now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.”

When we read the phrases “chosen race and a holy nation.” we can be pardoned for thinking of a new exclusive community.

But this new identity is not based on the privilege of any racial or national group, but one which renders such identities irrelevant because it is based on Jesus Christ alone. Their primary identity is in him. It would be no justification for cosiness, or feelings of superiority. On the contrary, this new nation, this new community was open to all who believed in Jesus Christ.

Some might be surprised to think of God's community being considered a priesthood. There are differing ways of looking at the role of a priest in today's church. But the teaching of the early church (implied here) was that the death of Christ (with the symbolic tearing of the curtain which had blocked all but the High Priest entering the temple's holiest part and then only annually) - in Christ's death - direct access to God's presence was opened - to all.

In that sense, all who believe in Jesus are called to be priests, to prayerfully represent **the world to God** as we bring to him its sins and troubles and pray for forgiveness and reconciliation and salvation for the world, **AND to represent God in and to the world.**

And that last, the fourth category? - “God's own people.” Once again, if we think the phrase “God's own people” suggests arrogance or smugness as the attitude of a Christian community, let the verses following disabuse us.

Let me read the whole of verse 9.

*“**But you** are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people”. Why? – not for their own benefit, not for our benefit – “but. in order, says Peter, that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

In these weeks leading up to the Pentecost weekend on June 3rd and 4th, we at St Paul's and other churches in this diocese and around Australia are joining in an initiative of the Anglican Church in the UK, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, using words from the Lord's Prayer as its title “Thy Kingdom Come”.

We are being asked to take seriously our desire for others to come to know Jesus Christ, to call people towards the marvellous light of Christ's love and grace, identifying 5 people in our network of family, friends, colleagues for whom we will consistently pray and whom we will invite to services at Pentecost. Some of you will have already taken up that challenge to prayer, and it is not too late to begin now.

As we pray, God will surely work in the lives of those who do not yet know Jesus, or who have drifted away from earlier commitment.

We live in a world of individualism and isolation, in spite of the massive energy put into social media; we live in a broken world of fractured relationships and shattered moral boundaries, even as more walls of exclusion are erected. This is, in many respects, and for some more than others, a dark world of sin and suffering and loneliness, not belonging anywhere.

But Jesus Christ has shone his light into our hearts and placed us in his new community, where we truly belong, and that light can shine in theirs also.

In our reading from the book of Acts we were given a brief glimpse into the Christian community in the early days after Pentecost. What a picture of generosity and joy as they shared in prayer and teaching and the meal which Jesus gave them to remind them of his passion.

They wanted to grow in their knowledge and love of God; like hungry infants, they were eager to feed on the spiritual milk of which Peter spoke in verse 2 .

But there was nothing closed about their group, they wanted to grow in numbers as well as faith. There was a constant stream of new believers – more living stones were added to the household.

And we pray that this will continue to happen here at St Paul's and, increasingly so, and that we would be open to receive any who want to believe - whatever their background, whatever the darkness which they have known.

Then we, and they, will continue to echo the prophet of old who said

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people

By his grace, nobodies become somebodies in his household.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We belong to him and can claim so in humble, grateful confidence.

So let us come to his table tonight with deep thankfulness that we can be fed and nourished by the word of God and in the taking of the bread and wine together and be strengthened as we continue to grow in love of Christ