
Acts 7.55-60; Ps 31.1-5, 15-16 (or Ps 119.9-32);
1 Pet 2.1-10; Jn 14.1-14

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Peter's 1st letter
is addressed to
the recently established churches
throughout Asia Minor –
modern-day Turkey.

In the 1st chapter,
St Peter has exulted in
the grace and mercy
of God the Father
whereby his readers
have been brought
to a living faith
in Jesus Christ.
(1 Pt 1.3-9)

*

But St Peter's
particular incentive
to put pen to paper
is the news of their
having become victims
of slander and persecution
on account of their
new-found faith.

St Peter writes therefore
to encourage
and reassure them –
and to exhort them
not to let other's hostility
tempt them back into
their old way of life,
but to hold firm
to the word of Christ,
and to be holy
in all their conduct –
especially in their sincere
love for one another.
(1 Pt 1.21f.)

This morning's text
begins along the same lines:
*Rid yourselves, therefore,
of all malice, and all guile,
insincerity, envy, and all slander.
Like newborn infants,
long for the pure, spiritual milk,
so that by it you may
grow into salvation –
if indeed you have tasted
that the Lord is good.*
(1 Pt 2.1-3)

All the vices listed here
involve deceit,
double-mindedness,
and the subtle corruption
of what Jesus called
...wolves in sheep's clothing –
the appearance of nobility
and kindness
masking the nasty intentions
of a malicious heart.

In stark contrast,
St Peter urges his readers,
as those who
*...have tasted that
the Lord is good...,
to hunger and thirst
for righteousness
as infants do for
their mother's milk.*
(1 Pt 2.2f.)

St Peter here echoes Jesus
and his startling reversal
of his disciples' interfering
with little children:
*Let the little children
come to me...;
for it is to such as these
that the kingdom of heaven belongs.*
(Mt 19.14)

*

Are we persuaded
by Jesus and Peter
to become as *newborn infants,
little children,*
genuinely attentive to our Lord?

Or, if we're honest,
do we prefer the
taking-things-into-
our-own-hands
sophistication of
mature know-it-alls?

If we insist on
our childlike availability,
are we prepared to
recognise in ourselves
the underlying *guile*
and *insincerity*
of which St Peter urges us
in no uncertain terms
to *rid ourselves*?

Enough!

Moving on.

In these opening chapters
St Peter deploys a variety
of metaphors for Christ.

He has already
spoken of him as
...the imperishable seed
whereby his readers
...have been born anew;
as *...the lamb without*
defect or blemish who
by his precious blood
has ransomed
and redeemed them;
and as *...the pure spiritual milk*
of the Lord's goodness.
(1 Pet 1.23, 19; 2.2)

Now in verse 4
of this 2nd chapter
he speaks of Jesus as
...a living stone.

It's a metaphor he'll
improvise upon
for the next several verses:
v. 4: *Come to him*
a living stone;
v. 6: *...a cornerstone;*

v. 7 & 8: *...the stone the builders rejected,
and ...a stone that makes them stumble.*

Three kinds of stone:

- living stone,
- cornerstone,
- stumbling-block.

*

Before considering
each of them in turn,
I want to reflect on
the simple metaphor
of Christ as a rock.

It suggests, does it not,
a sense of –
- permanence,
- constancy,
- solidity, firmness –
in the midst of
shifting sands.

Recall the conclusion
of the Sermon on the Mount,
and Jesus' distinction between
those who heed his words,
and those who ignore them.

The former – like someone
who builds their house
on rock
so as to withstand
the storms of life;
the latter – like someone
who builds on sand
and collapses
in the storm.

Recall too
the Book of Hebrews'
description of Jesus as
*...the same yesterday,
today, and forever!*
(Heb 13.8)

Is there not here
something of a challenge
to our modern addiction to
the unqualified goodness
of novelty and change?

What then of St Peter's
three modifiers –
- *living* stone,
- *corner*-stone,
- *stumbling*-block?

*

Come to him, a living stone....
(1 Pet 2.4)

The juxtaposition is startling,
indeed, let's be frank –
impossible!

Is there anything
more dead than a stone?

Surely a *living stone*
is the dreaded
mixed metaphor
at its worst.

And yet, isn't that also
the indubitable force
of the image?

Jesus **is** *the same*
yesterday, today, and forever.

But..., never so that
we can pretend to have
- gotten hold of him;
- gotten hold of him
so as to possess him;
- possessed him
so as to preside over him.

Jesus Christ is *alive!*
- alive in the fullest
sense of the word,
- alive as only God
himself is alive,
- alive as the Lord
and giver of life.

How different this is
from accounts of Jesus

- as a historical hero
whom we admire
and try to imitate;
- or as a teacher like Socrates;
- or as a 'type' –
as one among many
spirituality gurus;
- or as a symbol
to be *reconstructed*
in terms of whatever
our pet projects,
or campaigns of reform
may be.

In each of these,
Jesus is dead,
and it's ourselves
and our passions,
commitments,
projects, ideals,
that resuscitate him
and make him relevant!

But, Jesus is not dead,
not buried in the past.

No!

Rather is he
the *living stone*.

A *living stone*, then.

But Jesus is also –
St Peter insists (quoting Isaiah) –
...a *cornerstone*
chosen and precious (2.6).

A *cornerstone*
is what we might call
the foundation
of the foundation:
that '...on which the whole weight
of an edifice rests'.
(Calvin, *Comm 1 Peter*, 261)

So is it with Jesus Christ
and his church.

The church and its mission
is to be defined entirely
in terms of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not to be
fitted into our
already determined
goals, plans, commitments.

Rather, they're to be
determined on his terms –
in the beginning,
but also all along the way.

Why?

Because,
St Peter tells us,
*...he is chosen and precious
in God's sight.*

I need hardly remind you
how important it is
for us at St Jude's
to know ourselves
as a community
centred in
and founded upon
Jesus Christ –
our *cornerstone*.

Through 50-plus years
of ordained ministry,
I'm all too familiar
with what it is for me
and for my parishes –
subtly and unaware –
to slip off that foundation.

To slip off,
and to exist instead
on the shifting sands
- of current fashions,
- of the world's priorities,
- of this or that instrument,
method
for increasing attendance,
increasing income –
oh yes – all for
the glory of God –

to whom, if we're honest,
we pay mere lip-service.

Which bring us finally,
and shockingly, disturbingly,
to Christ the *stumbling-block*.

To you ... *who believe*,
St Peter writes,
Jesus is precious;
But, for those who do not believe,
'The stone that
the builders rejected
has become the very head
of the corner',

and
'A stone that makes
them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall'.
(1 Pet 2.7-8a)

Christ is an offence
and stumbling-block
to those who refuse
to make him
their foundation.

The firmness
and reliability of Christ
are such as to sustain
all who depend
on him in faith.

Equally...,
his utter refusal
to become a play-thing –
manipulated and exploited
by those who want
to use him to their
own ends –
renders him their undoing.

Their open
or disguised resistance
to his claim upon them... –
in the end –
brings them to ruin.

*They stumble, writes St Peter,
because they disobey the word.*
(1 Pet 2.8)

Happily, St Peter
doesn't leave us
in this slough of despond!

*But you, he writes,
are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's own people....*
(1 Pet 2.9)

We who heed St Peter's warning
and rediscover ourselves
on the sure foundation
of our Lord's word,
are assured of our
ever-new identity.

We, St Jude's community,
belong to God –
beloved,
graciously summoned –
Sunday by Sunday,
indeed, morning by morning –
into his service.

What is it to serve our God?

St Peter again,
in the rest of this verse:
*...that you may proclaim
the mighty acts of him
who called you out of darkness
into his marvellous light.*
(1 Pet 2.9)

Knowing ourselves –
each of us, but more,
as a faith community –
to have been brought
out of unbelief
and self-obsession,
into the *marvellous light*
of our Lord's living presence –
we are set free.

Set free to live –
not obsessed with
current affairs

- personal,
- national,
- international,
but as defined by,
motivated by,
the ever-present grace
and love of God
made known in his *mighty acts*.

What mighty acts?

The life, passion,
resurrection, and ascension,
of our, and the world's,
Lord and saviour –
Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
says it well –
provocatively well:
'What is important
is not that God
is a spectator and participant
in our life today,
but that we are attentive
listeners and participants
in God's action
in the sacred story,
the story of Christ on earth....

It is in fact more important
for us to know what God
did to Israel,
in God's son Jesus Christ,
than to discover
what God intends
for us today'.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*
[Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005], 62)

Oh dear.

I fear we will disregard this.

Nod our assent,
but continue to live –
- our own life,
- but more, our life
as members of St Jude's,
not as one of *God's own people*
proclaiming – in word and deed,
his mighty acts,

but engaged in St Jude's
on our own terms
and according to our own
goals and values.

But, No.

Let us heed,
take to heart,
make our own,
St Peter's exhortation –
and with this I conclude:
*Come to [the Lord Jesus],
a living stone,
though rejected by mortals
yet chosen and precious in God's sight,
and like living stones,
let yourselves be built
into a spiritual house,
to be a holy priesthood,
to offer spiritual sacrifices
acceptable to God
through Jesus Christ.*

Amen.