

1 Peter 2: 2-10

2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,
3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.
4 As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him
5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
6 For in Scripture it says: **'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'**
7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, **'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,'**
8 and, **'A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.'** They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.
9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14:1-14

1 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.
2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?
3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.
4 You know the way to the place where I am going.'
5 Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'
6 Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'
8 Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'
9 Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?'
10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.
11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.
12 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.
13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.
14 You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

The Living Stone 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

I want to talk about the passage we heard from Peter's letter, which was sent to a wide range of believers who were living right across what is present day Turkey. He calls them scattered exiles, and many of them were probably people who had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost, who had returned to their various towns. So this letter would have been delivered and read out to many different congregations. It struck me that when you think how many centuries people were unable to have access to these letters, how privileged we are to have access not only to different translations, but to commentaries by people who understand much more about them than you or I do.

Peter here talks about Jesus as the Living Stone. The first thing to say is that this is a bit ironic because as we know Jesus himself referred to Peter as the rock on which he would build his church. Peter's actually saying pretty much the opposite, that Jesus would be the cornerstone, and he's quoting the prophet Isaiah:(28:16) *See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.* The Jewish hope was that God's presence would one day return to the temple, which was built on the rock or the cornerstone. The cornerstone was the symbolic central stone which completed the structure. And Peter's using this image of the church as a building. But a pile of stones doesn't make a building.

The church is a spiritual building made of living stones.

That's you and me. But we're not viable as a church without the cornerstone, who is Jesus. But Jesus, the Living Stone (v 4), is rejected by humans, chosen by God. *'The stone the builders rejected'* which Peter quotes from Psalm 118, refers to the idea that the builders of the temple rejected a stone because they felt it was the wrong shape, but then when it came to the end of the project it was the *one stone* which would complete the structure, which fitted perfectly, without which it wasn't finished.

The truth revealed here was that people did not, when it came to the crunch, recognise the Messiah, because he didn't match their preconceptions. He didn't march heroically to their rescue, but meekly submitted to torture and death.

In fact he was an embarrassment, a crucified Messiah.

We all love a hero, but he wasn't one. It was all wrong. As Peter says, quoting Isaiah again, Is 8:14 *he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall*. The stumbling block who always challenges people's perceptions, and has done throughout history. Let's face it, if we think of ourselves as worldly wise, Jesus is an embarrassment. I was once leading an Alpha course and we were talking about Jesus being central to the faith. To which one guy announced 'I don't mind God but I don't know why we bother with all this Jesus stuff'. I replied that there wouldn't be any christianity without Jesus. And he got up, and walked out. The stumbling block.

And even in the church, too often he doesn't fit. If we don't reject him we try and sanitise him. Make him safe. Here's a poem by Stewart Henderson called *Splintered Messiah*:

**I don't want a splintered Messiah
In a sweat stained greasy grey robe
I want a new one
I couldn't take this one to parties
People would say 'Who's your friend?'
I'd give an embarrassed giggle and change the subject.
If I took him home
I'd have to bandage his hands
The neighbours would think he's a football hooligan
I don't want his cross in the hall
It doesn't go with the wallpaper
I don't want him standing there
Like a sad ballet dancer with holes in his tights
I want a different Messiah
Streamlined and inoffensive
I want one from a catalogue
Who's as quiet as a monastery
I want a package tour Messiah
Not one who takes me to Golgotha
I want a King of Kings with blow waves in his hair
I don't want the true Christ
I want a false one. Stewart Henderson**

Many Christians, myself included, often find it difficult to talk about Jesus openly. He's not safe. There's a story of a pastor who to illustrate Jesus' love for the poor disguised himself as a homeless person and sat in the front pew of his own church on a Sunday morning. He was asked to leave. Jesus would go with him. He is the only man in history who lived a blameless life, and yet still for many people, even Christians, he's not an acceptable subject of conversation. Why is that?

Peter says *to you who believe, this stone is precious.*

How precious? There's a choice to be made. It depends on whether we really believe He is who He claimed to be, and if so whether we're prepared, as Peter himself did, to leave *everything* and follow Him. And this doesn't necessarily mean give up your job and go and work for a church. It's simply about priorities.

Who or what do we worship? Money? Possessions? God maybe. But that's not enough if we don't accept Jesus.

In our reading from John's gospel Jesus says this *7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* For many, that's not an acceptable claim.

Too exclusive. We like a wide choice. But this is the power of the cross. God in person came to die for us. What other 'god' ever made such a sacrifice? Peter finishes here by addressing those who *have* made a commitment to Jesus.

You (the church) are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

And so we're a **spiritual building**, each of us indispensable to the structure. Jesus is the cornerstone. We've learnt in the last few weeks (if we didn't know) that we're *not* defined by our physical buildings. Many churches have discovered that there's more interest in the gospel than is suggested by how many turn up in church on a Sunday. A recent survey in England showed that, although only about 6% of people attend church on Sundays, around 25% have tuned in to a live-streamed service since the pandemic began. Here's a quote from Tim Chesterton, a Canadian pastor: *In the New Testament, Christianity was not a religion. It had no professional priesthood; in fact, it saw itself....as a royal priesthood (v9) to which all its members belonged. Ministry was shared by all Christians under the direction of elders. And Christianity had no sacred spaces; the early Christians met in homes in small groups, and did their evangelizing in public spaces.* We in Robertsbridge, Hurst Green and Salehurst are a community of faith. We don't offer religion, we offer the message of Jesus which is one of hope, of healing and of eternal life starting today, not when we die. He calls each of us listening to this out of darkness into his wonderful light. Our prayer is that many will respond.