

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for May 10, 2020 ~ Easter 5A

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

A poet has reminded us that there are “sermons in stones.” Of course, he had in mind the great church buildings of the ages whose magnificent towers and arches have inspired people and pointed the way to God.

Saint Peter, the writer of today's epistle, after his confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, was called a rock. This metaphor must have had special meaning for Peter because he used it in his first epistle to explain the relationship between Christ and those believers he was binding together into the Church.

Drawing heavily on passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and his own life as a faithful Jew, Peter proclaims in this message to the baptized that God is building a new temple.

In God's new temple, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

Psalm 118 is a processional hymn for the feast of tabernacles. This feast, as you know as you may recall, celebrates the time when Israel sojourned in the wilderness before the entrance into the promised land. Speaking of how the Hebrew people were looked down upon by other nations, yet chosen by God to fulfill his spiritual vocation, the psalmist says, “The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all” (Psalm 118:22). That is, the cornerstone.

Jesus used this passage of psalmody to refer to himself as he tried to explain the meaning of the rejection he was experiencing. And Peter reiterates it.

Buildings today are seldom built the way they used to be built. We live in a city of concrete, glass, and steel. Traditionally, the first stone to be set in place in a building is at the extremity of the angle. It is the cornerstone. The cornerstone is visible and controls the design of the building. All the other stones depend upon the cornerstone and have their cohesion in it. The cornerstone has to be carefully selected and carefully cut.

When the world rejected Israel God chose Israel as the cornerstone. When the world rejected Jesus God raised him up and made him the cornerstone in his new temple. God has a way of intervening in human history to bring his redemptive purposes into focus.

Peter says that those who do not reject Jesus but trust him know how valuable he is in God's plan. But those who reject him will find him to be a stumbling block in their path. By this he simply means to say that Christ cannot be simply taken or left. As the biblical scholar Selwyn has said, “to those who refuse believe, he is a constant anomaly, meeting them in unexpected places and challenging their indifference.” We will have to contend with him. It is “the scandal of the cross.” No matter how often we try to turn our backs on him and run away, this strange man, rejected and hanging on a cross, will not let us alone. The message is simple; God has chosen Jesus Christ as the determinative building block upon which his new temple is built. In one way or another there is no escaping the fact that he will succeed.

Peter goes on to say that those who place their trust in Christ the cornerstone will be the living stones in God's new temple.

Perhaps you were thinking, "I'm not worthy. I'm not ready to be used by God in that way. There are things you don't know about me." Maybe you feel like a stone that has been rejected. If you're having those thoughts and feelings, you may also find that you're constantly tripping over yourself.

There is within each one of us something dark and sinister lurking just beneath the surface of consciousness. We are not normally aware of its presence but we unconsciously project it onto others whom we find ourselves rejecting. It is less painful to deny its presence in us, project it onto someone else, and hate that person. That may be what's happening in the racism that is re-emerging among and within us, an example of which we have seen in the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. It may be what's happening with the neighbor you can't stand or the family member you hate to see coming.

But I believe God loves that dark side of each of us just as intensely as all the rest. And God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, never seeks the destruction of that which is evil but rather its transformation, its redemption. Life, new life, is the result God seeks.

When we go into the darkness *with* Christ we can learn to recognize the stone within us that we have rejected and stumbled over. He will guide our arms as we embrace it in redemptive love and something within us will be changed. The stone which the builders rejected will become the one that completes our personality. Christ can lead us in this search through the rooms of the mansion because Christ, who was rejected and exalted, has been there before us. This is the way a Christian is like a living stone. Each of us has the rather private journey to make. But we can't do it in isolation from others who are all working out their own salvation. After all, the metaphor is not complete unless the living stones are fit together to build a living temple. Christianity is community.

I'm reminded of a story I once heard about a Spartan King who was boasting to a visiting monarch about the walls of Sparta. The visitor looked about him but could see no walls. He said to the Spartan King, "Where are these walls about which you boast so much?" His host pointed at his bodyguard of magnificent troops. "These," he said, "are the walls of Sparta. Every man a brick."

So long as a brick is by itself, it is useless. It becomes useful only when it is incorporated into a structure, a building, a wall. So it is with the individual Christian; to realize my destiny as one of the living stones, I must not remain alone but must be joined to you in the temple God is building.

God's new temple is more than something to look at; it has a function.

Really, I should have mentioned this before, because in architecture the principle is that form should follow function. It is important in designing a building to first determine the function, then let the form emerge to facilitate that function. If you don't do this, your building will determine your function. You will not be in charge; your building will be. Imagine a hospital with no operating rooms, a fire station with no place to park the fire engines, a pizza parlor with no ovens, a church house with no altar.

There is a function for this new temple God is building. That function, that mission, is to tell forth the excellencies of God. That is to say, to let others know about the mighty works of God and to express God's infinite love to others.

Peter says the stones in this temple become priests. You are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people. But, "for what," we ask. Chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light.

There are two great characteristics of a priest: Firstly, the priest, whose task it is to bring others to God, has access to God. In the ancient world, this access to God was the privilege of the professional priest and, in particular, the high priest, who alone could enter the Holy of Holies. Through Jesus Christ, the new and living way, access to God becomes the privilege of every Christian. Further, the Latin word for priest is *pontifex* which means “bridgebuilder.” The priest is one who builds bridges upon which others may come to God. The Christian has the privilege of introducing others to the Savior who has found us, loved us, and built a bridge for us.

Secondly, the priest is one who brings an offering to God. Every Christian is called to continually bring his or her offering to God. Under the old dispensation, the offerings brought were animal sacrifices. But Christians have other kinds of sacrifices or offerings to make.

Christians make work an offering. Everything is done for God and God's glory. Even the smallest task is clad with glory. Christians make worship an offering. Worship becomes a great joy when we gather together or when we're apart. Worship is not so much about us as it is about God. When we worship, we get ourselves off our hands. Christians make our lives an offering. “Present yourselves, your souls and bodies, a living sacrifice.”

What God desires most of all is the love of our hearts and service of our lives. That is the highest sacrifice. According to the old tradition, our sacrifices should be unblemished. There is only one way within the Christian faith to remove all blemishes from an offering. Through reconciliation with God, with the darkness within, and with our sisters and brothers. Jesus Christ, the only truly unblemished sacrifice, makes it possible for us when our offerings are joined with his.

This is the function of God's new temple, of which you and I are living stones.