



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 30th April 2023, Easter 4

Living stones by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

*15 Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter"; 16 therefore thus says the Lord God, "See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: 'One who trusts will not panic.' And I will make justice the line and righteousness the plummet; hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. **Isaiah 28:15-17***

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5 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. 6 For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." 7 This honour, then, is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," 8 and "A stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

During the season of Easter, we've been dipping into the letter of First Peter to reflect on what difference Easter makes to our lives now. The letter is full of metaphor and rich imagery as the author tries to put into words the mystery of our participation in Jesus' resurrection. For him, it is not just something that *happened* to Jesus. It is something that is *happening* to us. Something that is unfolding.

And so, a couple of weeks ago we sat with Peter's image of being born into a "living hope". The resurrection now is a sure and certain hope in the midst of our current trials and tribulations. It opens us up to a new future beyond what we're able to imagine for ourselves.

The resurrection is not just about *future* hope though. Last week, we reflected on what difference the resurrection makes to our *past*. We explored how the resurrection is redeeming our *pasts* as we learn to remember *rightly*. We remember from the empty grave through the peace won on the cross and in so doing are opened up to healing, forgiveness, and wholeness.

This week Peter gives us another metaphor. One which is taken from the Old Testament. He describes the risen Jesus as a *living stone* which, though rejected, has become the cornerstone, the foundation stone, of the spiritual house in which God dwells. *A living stone*.

The more I've sat with this metaphor this week, the more it seems to expand and take on levels of nuance. I guess that's the beauty of metaphor: it's expansive rather than reductive. There's no way I can do justice to it in one sermon, so I want to focus on one aspect of it.

That is that the metaphor of stones being built into a house is an image of community. Peter's letter is written to church communities dispersed in Asia Minor – so he always has the community in mind. In fact, most of Paul's corpus as well is addressed to the church community. In the English-speaking world we often lose that nuance because we don't have a different word for "you" plural and "you" singular. So, it's important to note the point:

That is: for Peter, Jesus' resurrection is something we participate in *together*. The living hope into which we're born is hope for a future together as *a new community*. And the *pasts* from which we're being redeemed open us up to forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. In short, *new community*.

It's worth labouring the point. You know in the West, at least for the last few centuries, we've tended to imagine salvation and resurrection in quite individualistic terms. It's something that runs deep in the Western psyche.

You can see it in the way the resurrection of Christ has tended to be depicted in Western art. Take for example this renaissance piece by Raphael. Christ is floating victorious from the grave, while everyone else looks on with awe and wonder. The resurrection is something that happens *to* Jesus. A solitary act.

Very different from Eastern depictions which tend to point to the resurrection as the beginning of the new creation and the new humanity ... more about that in a couple of weeks.

But the image that Peter gives us today doesn't allow us to imagine the resurrection in purely individualistic terms. In his metaphor, the risen Jesus is described as a living stone among *many other living stones* being built together into a house. It's an image of community.

And in this image, Jesus is undoubtedly the first and most important stone. But not even he is set apart as fundamentally different from the rest of us in this metaphor. Peter is imagining his resurrection not in sole isolation but as the beginning of a much larger project. A project that you and I are part of. We are all living stones being built up and held together by the mortar of the Holy Spirit.

So, what does this all mean? Well, Isaiah, who Peter's quoting, goes into greater depth. The house, which is being built, is measured by the instruments of "justice" and "righteousness". Peter's suggestion of course is that this new community of the risen Jesus is a community characterised, *ordered*, by justice resulting in God's life flourishing for all. Justice resulting in flourishing life, fullness of life for all.

There's a profound challenge here. It means to follow the risen Jesus is to actively pursue justice for every person in our midst. Because if injustice continues to exist in our community, then the very integrity of the house is at stake.

Isaiah is fairly emphatic as to where this ends up: A community measured not by justice, but by lies, falsehood, and self-interest will lead to the breakdown of community and the diminishing of life for all.

I think we're seeing this in real time today in a society where misinformation and self-interest flourishes. Ultimately, he says, it's as if we are making a covenant with death at this point. Pretty damning language.

But as followers of the risen Jesus, we're oriented to something different. Peter wants us to adjust to the idea that our salvation is not *only* tethered to Christ. But because we're tethered to Christ, our salvation is *also* tethered to one another. In fact, tethered to *every person*. My future is bound up with *your* future, is bound up with *their* future, is bound up with *our* future. For Peter, there's no "I" without "we".

And that's why, as frustrating as the church can be, to be followers of Jesus is to be part of this new community he is building. For Peter, it's impossible to imagine it any other way.

It's quite challenging to think that *my* salvation is tethered to everyone else. Bring to mind for a moment the person who most gets on your nerves. No one wants to think of someone, but I suspect you have someone in your mind right now. It's a very inconvenient truth to acknowledge that your salvation is bound to theirs. And that your salvation is worked out now *as you learn to live life with them*.

There is something deeply transformational that comes through learning to be in community with people we struggle with, people who hurt us, people who have different political or spiritual persuasions to us – especially at a time when society is becoming more polarised. And this learning to live together – I think Peter would suggest – anticipates heaven on earth. It's *that* radical. *That* transformative.

There is a danger though. The danger in this metaphor of the church as a temple, the very dwelling place of God, is that we develop a misplaced sense of superiority. In fact, in this passage from First Peter, the church is called precious, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, chosen by God...

...that's pretty lofty language. We'd be forgiven for thinking that the church has some exclusive claim to the risen Jesus, to heaven, salvation, God's favour.

It seems to me that's problematic for at least two self-evident reasons. First, anyone who has been part of the church for any decent period of time will know that the church can be a pretty bruising place. Even an abusive and exploitative place. But second, I've seen plenty of examples of non-Christian community that is committed to justice and righteousness leading to flourishing of life.

So, what does it mean to be chosen then? Well, we're chosen to be a priesthood, a temple. And the role of the priesthood in ancient Israel is not to have some exclusive claim to God. Rather it is to represent the truth of God's forgiveness and redeeming life to the people. Precisely as a messy, ordinary, broken community learning to live life together, we are witnesses to God's resurrecting life in the world, fulfilling a priestly role.

Peter says as much in our reading today: "We are chosen," he says, "in order to proclaim the excellence of God who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." In other words, this is

not a truth we're supposed to keep locked away confined by walls of stone. No, we are to proclaim it to the world.

I finish with this image. The final vision in the Bible – in the book of revelation – is of a new humanity at the centre of a new heaven and a new earth. But at the centre of this new human community, the author very intentionally notes that there is no temple – *for its temple is the Lord God himself* who is in all and through all. The whole of creation will be a temple of the risen Lord. A dwelling place of God in which justice and flourishing life will reign on earth as it is in heaven.

So as a community being shaped by the risen Jesus, may we learn to cry out for that justice and flourishing life in anticipation of the day when we won't be needed anymore for God will be all in all and justice & peace will reign. Amen.