

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Date: 22 February 2015

Reading: Psalm 118:19-29

1 Peter 2:4-12

Theme: Pictures of the church

Today we are beginning a new series of sermons taking our themes from the PEP Bible studies Sue and I, with Terry and Jane were learning about in Uganda in October last year.

PEP means Participation and Evaluation Programme and, just to remind us, it's a way of looking first at scripture with the congregation to see what we can find out about God and his plan and purpose for us. Then there is a period of discovery in the local community - a kind of community audit - to identify and celebrate what God has given in each village or town. The churches do this together and many people who are not necessarily Christian at all take part in the process. These people might be local teachers or local village or town councillors. We met both kinds of "interested parties" when we were out there in the autumn.

With the inspiration from scripture and the information from the audit, the church and community together finally decide what they should do with what they have been given. We

heard time and time again from the people we met in Uganda, that they are so fed up of feeling that they are reliant on the west to provide. They have come to a new understanding: that the "generosity of the west has taken away the pride of the African". Those who have done the PEP programme believe now more and more that the answer to their problems is in front on them, that the resources they need are there, given by God to use and that they themselves are the ones who can make the difference.

This is all very exciting ... but we are getting a little ahead of ourselves.

PEP begins with a study of pictures of the church.

There can I think be no doubt at all that Jesus was a great teacher. He told stories and painted pictures so that people could understand God better. He talked about very ordinary things: about salt and light, about the vine, about the fig tree and about the mustard seed.

It seems that his disciples, of whom Peter was one, picked up this style and way of thinking about things.

In this passage from 1 Peter 2 there are some very rich pictures and some very vivid illustrations to help us understand God better but also to understand where we fit into the overall pattern and strategy and plan.

In these next few weeks we are going to join with our African brothers and sisters and “do the PEP thing” alongside them. On Mothering Sunday our great friend Jane Achaloi will be visiting from Kampala to tell us more about it.

But first some background thoughts ...

When we think about pictures of the church, we need to remember two or three things:

- a. Church is not bricks and mortar: buildings are important but not the whole story. Church is people – gathered people.
- b. Sunday is not the only day in the week: Sunday is important but it’s not the whole story. Ministry and mission during the week are vital too.
- c. The church is not the only way God works: what the church does in its community and setting is important but it’s not the whole story. We must never forget ministry and mission opportunities in the family, at home, in the office, in the places where we relax and hang out – all of these are different spheres where we can have influence. A Christian wife or husband, or carer, or teacher, or doctor, or lawyer, or cleaner, or administrator, or handy man, or gym member, or golfer, or footballer, or hockey player. All are very important.

So let’s move from the background now to the first picture Peter brings to our minds ...

The first image Peter uses is a really interesting one: it’s a “living stone”. Peter, don’t forget, was called “The Rock” – Jesus gave him this kind of nickname – Rocky, Cephas, Peter, the rock. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church”.

And it’s this same kind of word or image that Peter now uses of Jesus himself – he calls Jesus not a rock but a “living stone”.

v4: Come to him a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God’s sight

Kathryn and I have had a really lovely break this past week in and around Winchester. On one of the days we visited Salisbury Cathedral. The weather was just amazing, the sky was blue and sun shining. And as we walked around, we realised again and afresh just how huge everything is, the size and scale of the architecture and the wonderful sense of the enduring work which was begun so many years ago.

Round the back of the cathedral, still on the site, is the stonemason’s workshop – you could see through the open gates the massive bits of stone being prepared for the repair and reconstruction work.

We also visited the cafe and the loos – important of course in themselves (!) but also because they, along with the font, were new additions, more recent examples of beautiful stonework and contemporary skill demonstrated for all to see.

Even in Jesus' day, stones were important and obvious images from the everyday world (like salt and light, the vine, the fig tree and the mustard seed). And to call Jesus a "living stone" was to say something unusual but very clear. The image of the Jewish temple would have been in their minds, but even without that everyone would have understood what Peter meant.

And yet, calling Jesus a "living stone" says something more than just he is important in the building. A "living stone" makes him personal. And not only that. The quotation from Isaiah 28 makes it clear that he is the cornerstone – the absolutely key stone in the building. Without him there would be no building.

So right at the start we can see Peter offering us a picture of the church which begins and ends with Jesus – the living stone. It's all about him. It always has been and always will be all about him. And today as much as ever in history we need to be really clear about that. The first picture of the church we need to be very clear about is not about the times of the services or the style of the music or the flowers or the refreshments or the children or the youth

or the elderly or gay marriage or whatever else. The Church is principally about Jesus. It's all about him. Of course, it's expression is about those other things too ... I exaggerate to make my point. But principally it's not. Principally it's about him: the cornerstone, the key stone, the capstone, the living stone ... without whom nothing else makes any sense.

Now Peter takes this building image further. He says:

v5: Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house ...

There is something really exciting about this. In fact there are two really exciting things:

- a. Christians are to be like living stones
- b. Christians are to let ourselves be built into something

Christians are to be like living stones

There is something really powerful about the fact that Christians have a very close and a very intimate relationship with Jesus. The Bible calls us his brothers and sisters. The Bible says that we are adopted into his family. The Bible says that God is our Father too. We fundamentally relate to him and belong to him. Jesus is the living stone and we too are to be like living stones. We are very like him. And that is very exciting.

Peter calls JC the living stone (singular) and those who follow him living stones (plural). Even in the Holy Land today the Christians there are known as the “living stones”. There are fewer and fewer of them but they bear the same name given to Christians all those years ago by Peter here in the NT letter.

You see I think it’s very easy for us to think that he is so different from us that we can’t get anywhere close. And of course at one level he is: Jesus was and is uniquely the son of God who lived and died for the sins of the world – we can’t do that. But because he lived and died and, when he went back to be with his Father in heaven, sent us his Spirit to live with us and within us, we can be like him ... maybe more than we think. By his Spirit he lives in us. He changes us from the inside out. And in the words of the ancient prayer:

Prayers of St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

*Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
With compassion on this world.*

He is a living stone and we are to be like living stones. We are intimately related. And that is a huge privilege. Not something we should overlook or underestimate or undervalue. As Christians we are to be like living stones.

But that’s not all ...

Interestingly, Peter says that the stone is both rejected and chosen - rejected by mortals but chosen by God. This picks up the same thought that John has in the first chapter of his gospel. Here the image is not a stone, it’s the word, but John says this:

He was in the world and the world came into being through him, yet the world didn’t know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.

We need to remember this aspect of Jesus’ life and character, that he was rejected, not accepted, he was shunned, he was ridiculed and ultimately he was put to death. Friends, we follow a Saviour and Lord who was the wrong side of acceptability, who knew what it was to be rejected and forsaken, who spent much of his life as an outsider as far as the religious establishment was concerned. We will pick this theme up again more clearly as Lent unfolds as we ask how like him in this we really are.

But we also see a Jesus, a Saviour and Lord, who was chosen by God and precious in his sight. And we are to be like him in this also.

And we may need to consider this: are we more interested in what people think that what God thinks? Are we more concerned about fitting in and keeping our heads down or are we willing to be known as those who love and follow

the one who was chosen and precious? And who in turn are themselves chosen and precious?

For the Ugandan and for us in the leafy suburbs following Jesus the living stone puts us at odds with the world around us and puts us in place where we know we are following one who was chosen and precious. And if he was chosen and precious in God's sight we may say it doesn't matter two hoots what the world may say about him or about us.

And this following business put our names right in the frame. Peter says that Jesus is the living stone and we are to be living stones, like him, reflecting him, living for him – also chosen and precious in God's sight. And I just wonder whether we feel that? Do we really feel that we are chosen and precious? Do we really know that we are chosen and precious? Have we really got it that we matter to God and are loved by him?

For some of us this may be a revelation. Maybe we don't have this deep sense of security from any human relationship past or present. Maybe we have not known the love of a father, or a mother, or a child as we could or should have done. Maybe this belonging to God stuff is very new news for us today. Maybe it's just a lovely reminder of something we have known for many years and delight to hear all over again.

Christians are to be like living stones: you and me to be like him.

But there's more ...

Christians are to let ourselves be built into something

The General Election is not too far away. We hope to hold a Hustings meeting here as we have in the past to showcase the choice of candidates we will have to consider on Thursday 7 May. The government and indeed all the candidates will be keen to encourage you to vote for them. And the Christian vote, the voting power of those involved in the Christian church, cannot be overlooked.

The truth is that volunteers from churches contribute a huge number of hours to making a difference in society in the UK in so many different ways. In education, in the health service, in helping with children and young people, with the elderly, with those with special needs – the list goes on and on and on.

Christians are to let ourselves be built into something

Someone I heard this week said that the work of the church was to "Love God. Love people. Do stuff". As Christians we are to be built into a workforce that does stuff, that makes a difference, that makes the community in which live a better place, that makes the family with which we live into a more godly and holy community, that makes

our workplace somewhere where our Christian influence is noticed and appreciated and valued.

Christians are to let ourselves be built into something

When the election comes around we may want to think about that as we cast our vote. Will the party we support with our vote make the best use of what we have to offer? Will the party we support with our vote recognise and appreciate the contribution we can make? Or will the party we support with our vote take no notice of our voice and work actively to stifle or invalidate the message we carry in what we do and in what we say?

There are several other pictures here for us to consider further: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a call from darkness into light – these must be for another day.

For today, let's simply remember the picture of Jesus the living stone and ourselves as living stones like him and make our prayer that we would follow his example and continue his work so that the world might be a better place, our community be transformed for good and our own lives be more worthwhile and meaningful.

Loving God. Loving people. Doing stuff – as living stones being built into something - is a great place to start.

Let's pray ...