



Sermon

“Not just a club: A Chosen, Treasured, Kingdom of Priests”

1 Peter 2:2-10

30th April 2023

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Peter wrote his first epistle to churches in the area occupied by modern-day Turkey. It can be deduced that he wrote in AD 63, so about 30 years after the resurrection. He wrote to Christians who were persecuted.

Pure milk

In this section of the letter, he tells them to crave spiritual milk, like a newborn baby. Do you remember what that looks like? The baby demands food with loud cries. It is single-minded about sucking the milk. In fact, at that early stage life consists of feed-sleep-repeat.

We should eagerly desire - we should hunger for - spiritual sustenance from the Word. Have you watched new Christians grow. If (and only if) they read the Bible enthusiastically I reckon they grow remarkably fast over 6 months, a year and by two years, they are well grounded in the faith. When I was newly saved, I could not get enough of the Bible. I was reading, reading, reading it, gulping it down, you might say. I was excited! I was seeing Jesus prefigured in the Old Testament; learning more of him in the New Testament. Has it been like that for you? Peter says that feeding on the pure spiritual milk we will grow into full salvation. Actually, the verb is passive – we will be grown! It is an automatic outcome of good spiritual food. It's the same with a baby – if the baby feeds well, it will grow bigger and plumper; that is the consequence.

Do you need to read the Bible to allow yourself to be grown up into salvation? Another translation of pure is 'unadulterated': not watered down or polluted. Catherine Marshall was the wife of Peter Marshall, whom Peter Lloyd quoted last week. In one of her devotional books, she told the story of Japanese prisoners of war who were fed good food laced with castor oil. The effect was that their bodies could not absorb the nutrients before the food was passed through their systems. They ate good food and starved to death. The same can apply to us as we read the Bible. If we accompany it by unbelief and unbelieving teaching or interpretation, it will not feed us, because we are rejecting the message it is bringing to us. Let us feed on the pure Word of the Lord to us.

Living Stones

Peter continues with the idea of the church being made up of believers and being the temple of God. A temple is the dwelling of a god. The New Testament proclaims Jesus as the true temple – the earthly dwelling of God. Paul used the metaphor that we are parts of the body of Christ; Peter used the temple analogy. Christians are living stones being built into the spiritual house for God on earth. Together, we are a temple of the Holy Spirit.

In this metaphor, Peter sees Christ as the cornerstone of the church. The Old Testament makes use of several stone metaphors all related to the Lord:

- There is the idea of the Lord being “my rock” in the sense of a safe hiding place or as the solid foundation¹.
- There is the rock which Daniel saw which would destroy the World dominating empire².
- There was the rock in the wilderness from which water flowed to provide for the Israelites³.
- There is the stone rejected which became the cornerstone⁴.
- There is the stone of stumbling.

All of these are applied to Christ in the New Testament.

The cornerstone is very important when building with stone. It must be prepared carefully for it sets the angle of the walls both horizontally and vertically.

Peter drew on 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 positive message is that when we trust in Christ, we are built into this corporate dwelling place of God the Holy Spirit. We are cleansed and will not be put to shame. God has chosen this cornerstone and Christ is very precious. And to us who believe, he is precious as our saviour and our God too.

Rejection of Christ

However, there is another possible response to Jesus. That is to reject his claims and so reject him. Peter explores this response in verses 7-8.

But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” [Ps 118:22]

⁸ and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” [Is 8:14] They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

He applies this to the Jewish leaders who plotted to kill Jesus and even after the resurrection tried to suppress the believers. They are the builders who have rejected the stone provided by God for the building. Yet God used that stone, Jesus, as the most important, foundational cornerstone.

The quote from Isaiah 8, says that Jesus as the suffering Messiah was an idea they tripped over. It was something they could not accept. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23 wrote, “... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” To the Jews (especially the Saducees who did not believe in a resurrection) the idea of the Messiah dying and rising again tripped them up. While to the Greeks it seemed to be foolishness.

I said that Jesus explained the Old Testament scriptures to his disciples after his resurrection and it flows out of their teaching. The idea of the Christ being the rock of God is a major theme in this passage. It is not new, it occurs in the Old Testament, but was not recognised by the disciples before the crucifixion. Was Peter drawing on years of study and thinking? I think not. We find the same metaphor in use in the very early church. In Acts 3, Peter and John healed the crippled beggar at the temple gate. They preached that Jesus had been killed but they were witnesses to his resurrection. Peter called his hearers to repent and turn to God for forgiveness of their sins and to receive the Christ – who is Jesus. The temple authorities heard about this and came to stop such preaching. Peter and John were imprisoned overnight and brought before the Jewish Council, the next day. They were asked by what authority they had done this healing. Again, Peter responded it was in the name of Jesus whom they had crucified. And Peter applied Psalm 118:2 to them –

¹ Psalm 18:2 ff

² Daniel 2:34ff

³ Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:8ff; 1 Corinthians 10:4

⁴ Isaiah 8:14, 28:16; Psalm 118:22;

one of the verses he used in 1 Peter 2. in Acts 4:11 we read, “Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’”

This is presumably only a short time after the day of Pentecost. Yet, already Peter has understanding of this Old Testament scripture being fulfilled in Christ. And it relates to the rejection of Christ by his people – which is not the easiest thing for him to understand. I think this is an instance of a scripture that Jesus had unfolded to the apostles and Peter is drawing on the teaching he received between the resurrection and the ascension. We are hearing the teaching of Jesus about himself echoed through Peter’s words.

The Status of the Church

In verse 9 of the epistle, Peter returns to the status of those who believe and are built into this living temple of God’s people. And these all apply to us – so take them onboard.

We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.”

A chosen people: Those who are drawn to Christ are chosen by God. Not because we are special or deserving – no one deserves salvation: it is all undeserved grace. God chooses the weak and foolish not the strong and wise so that no one may boast before him⁵. His choice is for his own reasons and entirely by grace.

We are a royal priesthood: We are royal because we are in Christ the King of kings. We are a priesthood because we have direct access to God the Father, to pray, to intercede, to worship, to minister to him and for him.

A holy nation: We are holy that is set apart by God for his purposes. He declares us holy and makes us holy.

God’s special possession: The idea is of being acquired, kept safe, preserved. We have been acquired through salvation by Jesus. We are kept safe by Jesus so that no one can snatch us out of his hand.⁶

Peter continues to show us our status by way of three contrasts with our former state:

[God] 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.

We have been called from darkness into wonderful light. Paul put it in Colossians like this:

The Father ... has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.⁷

We were not a people, but God has made us his people. The Jewish view was that they had a covenant with God and the gentiles did not have such a covenant. However, with the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood, Christians also have a covenant relationship with God – so we are also the people of God.

We had not received mercy but now in Christ, we have received mercy.

And all this culminates in the statement “that you may declare the praises of him.” That is our duty and true sacrifice. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way in chapter 13:15:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

⁶ John 10:29-30

⁷ Colossians 1:13-14

So where are we? Is Jesus a nuisance or an irritant that trips you up? Is this talk of his resurrection sheer foolishness to you as a good Greek thinker? Or is he deeply precious to you and the foundation on which you build your life?

Do you feed on pure spiritual milk so that you may grow into the fulness of your salvation?

As you go out from here today, which of these statements about the church will you ponder and meditate on through the week?

We are:

1. a chosen people,
2. a royal priesthood,
3. a holy nation,
4. God's special possession, kept safe.

We have:

5. Been called from darkness into wonderful light,
6. Been made to be a people,
7. Received mercy.

God bless you as you walk in the light of your calling. Amen.