

Jesus the living stone

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Date: 23 June 2024

Preacher: Richard Newman

[0 : 00] If you've got a Bible and can keep that open, that would be a big help to me to look at it as we go through.

Things We All Have in Common by Pete Jackson. Now Pete happens to be a good friend of mine. I wouldn't tell him, but he's actually done a great job. I wouldn't tell him to his face because we have that sort of relationship, but he's done a great job with this book.

So when the publisher was doing a deal, an offer of 100 books for £100, I had a mad moment, rush of blood to the head and bought them.

So now, every time I go out, the aim is I tuck one in my pocket and I pray that I will not come home with it because I'll meet someone who I'll be pleased to give it to because they're interested enough to take it and to read it.

There's 12 little chapters and it's all about things that all people have in common. So there is, for example, the shame, the fear, the addict, the anxiety, the worshipper in us all. That's a flavour of the chapters in it.

[1 : 22] But the one I want to focus on this morning is the refugee in us all. So let me give you a little flavour. Let me read a bit to give you a flavour.

Just imagine what it's like to be a refugee. You're struggling to provide for your family, living in fear and don't know if you will survive. Even if you do, you have the prospect of many years, perhaps a lifetime of hardship and poverty.

What happened to drive someone from their home in the first place? There may be a number of reasons, but surely top of the pile is conflict. Terrible forms of conflict. War, terrorism, slavery and persecution have created millions upon millions of refugees.

And what do refugees want and need? The answer is obvious. Refuge. They want somewhere safe to call home, somewhere safe to live and work, somewhere safe where they can have access to food, water and medical care. Somewhere not just to survive, but to thrive.

Sadly, the situation we see in the world today is nothing new. The Bible is full of refugees. And Pete is right, isn't he? Because if you remember how this letter starts, back over the page, chapter 1, verse 1, Peter the Apostle writes, to God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia and so on.

[2 : 57] So it's written to first century refugees in first century places that you and I have likely never heard of. What has this got to do with my settled life in 21st century Cambridge? Well, Pete continues.

Now, I know this might sound strange, but there is a sense in which the Bible regards us all as refugees.

And he's right. You see, there's a sense in which none of us are at home. None of us are in our true home. So what do refugees need? What do, be they first century back in Peter's time, be they 21st century here this morning?

We need hope. We need good news. And wonderfully, in these brief seven verses, Peter encourages his readers in three ways.

We've got to, we're to rejoice in what we've got. We're to realise what we're part of. And we're to relish the work we've been given. Three things.

[4 : 11] So firstly then, we're to rejoice in what we've got. We have got a foundation for life. We have got a foundation to build on.

Let me read again verses four to six in the passage. As you come to him, Jesus, the living stone, rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him.

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.

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.

I love these verses because they're all about building. And that is what I have spent my working life doing, building. Just last Tuesday I was with a friend helping them lay foundations for a new extension.

[5 : 23] Friend was on the digger. I was on the wheelbarrow. He was loading my barrow. My job was to wheel it backwards and forwards, emptying it around the front of the house. I reckon my arms are six inches longer this week than they were last week.

But foundations are funny, aren't they? You can't see them, but they are absolutely essential. You can't build without them. If Steve's extension is going to stand, it needs solid, dependable foundations.

And the same is true of our lives. Because everyone is building on something. It could be work or career to give us status, to give us the income, to enjoy the material pleasures of home and holidays.

It could be relationships, a significant other, family and friends is where we get our meaning and purpose. It could be a hobby or an interest that soaks up our time.

Or perhaps image, looks, exercise, either for ourselves or to get the approval of others. There's nothing wrong with these things. Far from it.

[6 : 38] They're all good and God-given. But the question remains, what is it? But the question remains, what is it? Or perhaps who is it that underpins everything?

That ultimately directs and determines the course of our lives? Well, Jesus in these verses is described here as the living stone, chosen by God and precious to him.

The Old Testament verses that he quotes describe him as the cornerstone, which is the most important stone in any building.

It's laid first to ensure all the building that follows is square and level. Every brick is going to be okay because the cornerstone is in place.

And the brilliant thing about building on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he's a living stone because he's alive today, is that he will never let us down.

[7 : 45] That's what it means when he says we'll never be put to shame. We're not promised an easy life, but all other foundations will finally fail. If not before, then certainly when death comes stripping everything away.

Only Jesus is able to carry the weight of life's struggles and storms. Only Jesus will keep us standing when death comes.

So let me ask you, refugee, what are you building your life on? What is the source of your hope this morning? Having disowned Jesus himself, then watched him crucified.

I guess Peter knows better than anyone. But twice he tells us here, Jesus has been rejected by our world. Verse 7, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

And I guess the builders here are the first builders of the temple, the nation of Israel, or perhaps its religious leaders. Verse 8, Jesus is a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

[8 : 58] It can be upsetting, unnerving, isolating, living in a world where the person we hold most dear is met with indifference, sometimes ridicule from society around.

Especially when that comes from friends or perhaps colleagues, even close family. So what do we need when that happens? Well that takes us to our second point.

We need friends. We need to know that we're not alone. We need to realise that we are part of something bigger and more beautiful than we can ever imagine.

The word church can be a little confusing. We instinctively think building when it actually means people.

Quite literally, assembly or gathering. So when Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo used to have their radio show on a Friday afternoon, they used to call it their church as they invited listeners in to come and listen to the film reviews.

[10 : 08] Picture language can be helpful, can't it? So the Bible writers use different images to help us to understand this thing, church. So it's like a human body, head and arms and limbs and what

have you.

It's like a bride. But here it's likened to a building with Jesus as the foundation, as we've seen. And if we love and follow him, well quite literally, I always like to bring visual aid.

Quite literally, we are a brick. If English isn't your first language and someone calls you a brick, perhaps you may be offended.

But actually, it's a compliment to be called a brick. It means that you are solid. You're dependable. I don't know where it comes from. It's a slang expression. But yes, you really are a brick according to these verses.

As you come to him, the living stone, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.

[11 : 23] And the building which Peter is talking about here is the temple, which in the Old Testament was massively important because it represented the dwelling place on earth for God.

It was the meeting place for where God and mankind came together. Not casually, but reverently, bloodily, as the priests offered animal sacrifices on behalf of the people to stone for sin and make this coming together possible.

So let me ask, do you realise what you are part of this morning? Is your view of church big enough? Beautiful enough? Because the temple was vast and stunning. Yes, I do understand that if we're to look around this morning at this gathering of 40, 50, 60 people in this bog-standard school hall, we'd probably look deeply unimpressive.

But not from God's perspective. From his view, we are intimately joined together. We're joined to his worldwide church meeting all over the world today.

[12 : 48] And we're joined to his ancient people who have been meeting stretching back to the beginning of time. So let's come back to our brick for a moment.

It's pretty unimpressive on its own, isn't it? Not sure how you could use it. Perhaps a paperweight on your desk, lob it through a bank window if you move to a rubber bank or something.

But it's pretty useless on its own. It only becomes of any value when it's built together with other bricks. That's when it comes into its own. And that is what God is doing as he builds his church with stones which are living stones.

Because the spirit of Jesus lives in each one of his people. And I just want to take some time teasing out some of the practical implications this morning of what this means.

So first, we're never to underestimate the significance of church. The meeting together on a Sunday morning like this. Caring for each other through the week.

[13 : 56] Have you ever thought that you have more in common, you are more joined to each other than even to your blood relatives? That's what it means to be church. From time to time, people ask me what church I go to.

And they always regret it. Because I always snap back and say, I don't go to church. I belong to church. Because church is the place of belonging.

And this impacts the pronouns that we use in the way we talk about church. So my mum moved to live with us about 18 months ago. And she's got better now.

But when she first came, she started coming along to Christchurch with us, which is wonderful. When she first came, she would talk in terms of you and they. And I'd say, Mum, it's not you and they.

The pronoun is us and we. So the way that we talk about church tells us a lot about how we see church. Remember, we belong to each other.

[15 : 02] We're built together. Can you love and follow Jesus without being part of a local church? Some would say yes. And I'm sure there are one or two exceptions.

But in light of Peter's teaching here, I think I'd need some persuading. And slightly related, I guess, unless we're moving away, we must never leave a church lightly.

It's a big thing. Imagine going up to a brick wall with a hammer and chisel and starting to chip away in order to remove a brick. Someone says, hey, what are you doing?

And you answer, well, this brick doesn't like being part of this wall anymore. It's a complete nonsense, isn't it? Of course, in church life, we will get bruised at times as we bump up against each other.

But we're family after all. But if any of us ever starts looking for the door, then we've got to make sure we have an early conversation with Chris or one of the wardens to pray things through, talk

things through.

[16:04] We must never leave a church lightly. And finally, I think in terms of our outreach, in recent years, I've become convinced that the best way to help people meet Jesus is to simply invite them along to church.

Because in the welcome they receive, the prayers that are prayed, the Bible that's read and proclaimed, it's all the truth.

It's the gospel. They're bumping up to Jesus all over the place. It is the place to meet him. So do think about that as you seek to share your love for him with others.

We live in an increasingly individualistic society, don't we? I think the buzzword for it is atomised. And there will be all kinds of reasons for this.

Social media certainly hasn't helped. And of course, the tide pulls this way of thinking into church life. And we mustn't. We mustn't be individualistic in our approach to church.

[17:10] But realise and remember who we are, what we're part of. That's something bigger and more beautiful than we can ever imagine.

Finally then, will we relish the work we've been given to, according to Peter, verse 9, to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

In other words, in our living and speaking, tell the world how brilliant Jesus is. I don't know whose job you'd fancy having, but I've got my eye on Prince William's.

Not a bad number. Tickets to Taylor Swift. Tickets to England games in the Euros. Best seats when he gets there. Open this building.

Visit that country. Everybody pleased to see you. Finest food and drink. But of course, William didn't apply for that job, did he?

[18:17] It's simply the result of who he is. The family he belongs to. And it's the same with us. We have amazing work. We have got an amazing job because of who we are.

The family that we have been born again into. So verse 4 of our passage. As you come to him, Jesus, verse 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.

Verse 9. For 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.

I wonder what Peter was thinking when he wrote those words, perhaps chuckling to himself as he thought back on the journey he'd been through since hooking up with Jesus, how much of a changed man he'd become.

Because if you know any of his story, we're told in Acts, back in Acts 10, he was really struggling with the idea of Gentiles, outsiders, having any place with God's people.

[19:42] He thought God was just for the chosen, the ancient people of Israel. But now, here he is, writing to refugees, ragtags like you and me, and saying, you're a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.

Let those words sink in a moment. If you love Jesus this morning, do you know who you are? Life can be crushing.

We can so easily get a downer on ourselves and have low self-worth. But will we hear what God has made us and the work he has for us?

It's pretty impressive, isn't it, I think, to see how well Peter knows his Old Testament, quoting it three times in seven short verses. But there's more, because in verse 9, he's quoting from the Old Testament book of Exodus 19, where Moses says, let me read it up, find it a moment and read it. Exodus 19. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

[21:30] So can you see how Peter picks up on them here and uses what was said to the ancient people of Israel? Those same words are true of his followers today.

The way that God has revealed himself to the world is through the story of a people. So he gave Israel a home and a law with the idea that as they followed that law, the surrounding nations were to look in on them and say, I want their God because their God is so good.

I want to be like they are. I want to have what they have. That was what it was meant to be a light to the Gentiles. Outsiders looking in and saying, I want that.

But of course, most of the Old Testament is the story of how they failed to live up to that calling and how God didn't give up on them. So today, we the church are sometimes said to be the new Israel.

With the way we live being so attractive to outsiders that people look in and say, hey, I want what they haven't got. I want, and of course, that is Jesus.

[22 : 45] That's how I became a Christian. Friends with someone, his life was so different. As I looked at him, I said to myself, well, whatever he's got, I want.

And of course, that was the Lord. I think Gen Zers are fed up with the mess that they've inherited. And they're concerned to make a difference in our world.

And that's a great thing, isn't it? So sometimes I love asking people the question, what are you doing to make the world a better place?

I think it's a great question because we can't argue with it, can we? We all want the world to be a better place. If you're asking a Gen Zer, they may say, well, I'm gluing myself to the road.

Or I'm throwing baked beans over a Monet. But if that question gets thrown back at me, I'll say, well, I've hooked up with a man who tells me to love my enemies, to forgive and not to hold on to grudges, to care for the sick, to be generous with the poor.

[23 : 58] And as we live that way, we discover it's a beautiful way, an attractive way. We shouldn't be surprised because it is God's way. We were having dinner with neighbours recently and they are lovely people, but they are hostile to God.

They're unhardened liberals. And we had this conversation and it came up and I chucked out the question, what are you doing to make the world a better place? It came back to me and the woman just nodded and agreed.

You can't disagree with it. The way Jesus teaches us to live is beautiful because it's God's way. So as bricks in the temple walls, we are a holy, royal priesthood.

We are all priests serving our wonderful Heavenly Father. And just as Old Testament priests' work was centred around sacrifice, so too ours, whether it's in the home or with housemates, the workplace with customers or colleagues, enjoying leisure time with friends.

It's not about being religious or weird. It's actually very ordinary. If you've got your Bible, just flip back a couple of pages to Hebrews 13, because I think these really help us to see how ordinary the sacrifice that of following Jesus is.

[25 : 29] So chapter 13, verse 15. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

So we shouldn't be slow or embarrassed to talk about our love for Jesus. And verse 16. Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Doing good and being generous, that's something we can all do, not hard to do. I started off with this book, and I think of the hundreds, I had a count up in the week.

I've given 28 away, 72 still to go. I'm going to stick at it. I'm not going to go home with this book. So if you are new to Christian things, and will be pleased to take it, I'll be delighted to give it to you.

Or if you've got a friend, do you think, oh, they could be interested in that, we'll take it, read it itself, and then pass it on. Chris, back to you. Thank you.