

Date: 22nd May 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: 1 Peter 2:1-12

Background to the reading

IT IS HIGHLY LIKELY that this is text was used in the early church as an introduction to new Christians who had been baptized and celebrated their first communion. The words in the text like “put aside”, “newborn babies” and “have tasted that the Lord is good” supports this idea. We know that in the early church new Christians were baptized in Christ, committing to a totally new lifestyle. It was the initiation rite of new believers to enter into the fellowship of believers. Then, after they had committed themselves through baptism to the new life in Christ, they took part in the ceremony of communion where they shared their oneness in Christ.

We do not know who the writer of 1 Peter was. Most probably it was one of the Apostle Peter’s followers who wrote this letter during the last few years of the first century after Christ.

The writer gives the new believers a “vice lists,” indicating what they should avoid. Verses 2 and 3 are again stressing their new status – they are like new born babies. But just like new born babies they must crave for spiritual milk or literally as it says in the Greek text “milk of the Word” so that they may “grow” to be strong Christians. They have a new life now. The Word of God will be their spiritual and physical nourishment. In the Greek text there is a second adjective translated as “pure”/ “unblemished” which emphasizes the idea that when they listen to God’s word alone, they will have all they need to survive.

From verse 4 the author explains their new status. Jesus Christ is the Stone, the Rock that was rejected by the Jews but chosen by God the Father. He made it possible for all who have faith to be part of His temple. Each new member is a stone that makes the holy temple. Each member as a priest has a responsibility to make and bring sacrifices to the Glory of God through their obedience to Christ. The image of God’s people as a “holy priesthood” is from Exodus 19:5–6 and appears more explicitly in Hebrews 2:9.

In the Old Testament times there was a Jewish sect called the Qumran community who applied Isaiah 28:16 to their own leadership – they being the precious cornerstone in Zion, the hill in Jerusalem where the temple was. The early Christians applied it to Jesus as we also find in Rom 9:33 as being the precious cornerstone. Each one that trusts in Him will never be in shame.

In verses 7–8 the author make use of the Jewish interpretive principle *gezerah shavah*, which linked texts that had a common key word, in this case stone. It makes it natural for the author to cite Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14. He interprets both texts as saying that to some Christ will be the precious cornerstone, but to others only a stumbling block!

Roughly half of verse 9 is a direct quotation of Exodus 19:6, implying that all Christians, including Gentile Christians, share in God's covenant with Israel. Jewish people on the Passover described their deliverance from Egypt as a call "from darkness into great light." Old Testament prophets taught that God had redeemed his people for his praise.

In verse 10 the author stresses their new position as the new people of God who received His full pardon and mercy. They are strangers because they are different. They must strive to get rid of all the sinful desires of this world. This was a philosophical phenomenon which said that the human soul is imprisoned by the body! Now the author uses it to say their souls can be imprisoned by the desires of the world.

In the last verse the author tells us of the living conditions of the early Christians. They suffered abuse from the Gentiles just like the Jews who lived as scattered people all over the world. Their safety was compromised because of their witness to the one true God. But the author encourages them not to stop living good lives and doing well to others. Despite their hardship, their actions will be a witness and a means by which the Gentiles will glorify God on his return.

Sermon

The text verses for the sermon are 4 & 5: ⁴ *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—* 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.*

There's a story about a king of Sparta in ancient Greece who boasted to a visiting monarch about the mighty walls of Sparta. But the guest looked around and didn't see any walls, and finally he said to his host, "I'd like to see those walls. Show them to me!" The Spartan ruler pointed with great satisfaction to some disciplined and well-trained troops, part of Sparta's mighty army, and exclaimed, "There they are! Those are the walls of Sparta!"

Just as each Spartan soldier was viewed by the king as a brick in his mighty wall, so we are viewed by God as "living stones... built up into a spiritual house"! You and I are the stones in the building of which Christ is the cornerstone, a building that cannot be moved or destroyed. In Christ we have a sure foundation. In and through Him we are part of a mighty wall of His temple on earth.

We have a huge responsibility as living stones. We need to make sure that we remain intact – if one stone is missing it compromises the whole building. Each one of us is important. Each one of us must make sure that we have enough cement that is love to be tied together in this one building. Each one of us must make sure we have enough "plaster" that is faith to make sure the cracks do not creep in. Each one of us must make sure that spiritual erosion does not damage our paintwork. The only way to make sure it does not happen is if we read and study God's word. And we must be committed to stand firm in our faith, even when the winds of this world blow

us away. We must remain in Christ despite the suffering and sacrifice that we endure as living stones on a daily basis.

If we start falling out of the wall of Christ's temple, we are loose stones, worthy of nothing. Then we can easily become stones in the hands of those who want to throw them at others to cause serious hurt and damage. Or we can become stumbling blocks in the way of others causing others to fall.

The building of God is always and ever evolving. Each time a new child is baptised in His name another stone is added. Each time someone confesses their faith another stone becomes part of the building of God. Each time we encourage, love and reach out to other stones we enhance the wall of believers.

And we have the surety that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone and the foundation of God's building.

The cornerstone was the major structural part of ancient buildings. It had to be strong enough to support what was built upon it, and it had to be precisely laid, because every other part of the structure was oriented to it. The cornerstone was the support, and the unifier of the entire building. Jesus Christ is our support, our refuge and strength. We need to be grateful to God that Jesus is our Rock and salvation. To be grateful means that we live in obedience to His will always and ever!

So let us all strive to be walls that are worthy to the builder who build them namely God. Let us be like the walls in Linlithgow palace still standing after a severe fire in 1746 and the exposure of many years. Yes, let us be an example of stones that are not lacking in zeal, devotion, commitment, sacrifice and strength because our Rock is Jesus Christ!

But we do not exist so that people can say, "What a great building this is". We don't even exist so that people can say, "What a great bunch of people this is." We exist so that people can look at us and say, "What a great God!"

Amen