

Sermon – May 10, 2020

By Pat Rugola

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you, O God, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Please join me in offering greetings to our sisters and brothers in Christ at St. Edward Whitehall, some of whom will be joining us during this live cast or later after the service is posted on Trinity's website, some of whom will be reading the sermon at home, along with the lessons and the order for Morning Prayer. This sermon was originally prepared for the people of St. Edward, and I am grateful to the rector for his kind permission to offer it here as well. We are all in this together.

We are all on a rocky road as we navigate our way through the COVID 19 pandemic. So when I looked up the lessons appointed for today, the epistle, from 1 Peter (1 Peter 2:2-10), the one with all the stones, called to me immediately. It seemed to me that the different kinds of stones we hear about in this lesson could tell us a lot about what we are to do and who we are to be to remain the Church in this difficult time.

Today's lesson begins with a reference to the letter's recipients as "newborn infants," (v. 2) and I'll return to that later.

The first mention of stones is in verse 4, where the readers of the letter are invited to "come to him, a living stone." The living stone is of course Jesus. The implicit contrast is with the dead stones that formed the temples and images of pagan sites of worship. A stone statue of Zeus or Apollo or the Roman emperor was inert, lifeless, unable to save or help. But Christ is a living stone, and through him comes salvation.

Next the readers are exhorted to be "like living stones," that is, to emulate Jesus the living stone (v. 5). "Let yourselves be built," the letter continues, "Into a spiritual house." (v. 5) This is a beautiful image, but a puzzling one. The readers of this letter, and, by implication, we ourselves as well, are to imagine ourselves as living stones, in imitation of our Lord. We are to imagine that the living stones, taken as a whole, constitute the

Church, the body of Christ, and are to join together to form a spiritual house. What would this look like? Imagine that in each of the congregations being addressed here there are living stones, new believers. Because they are alive, the stones grow in size and in wisdom; they grow into adulthood in the faith. Because of their faithful witness in proclaiming the mighty acts of God, verse 9 says, other living stones are added. Then all these living stones – the original ones, and those added through the testimony of the early believers – are joined together to form a spiritual house. We are not told how they are joined, what the mortar is that binds them together, but it must be through the work of the Holy Spirit. This may be a more literal interpretation than the author was hoping for, but I think it's a helpful way for us to try to flesh out this beautiful image, to try to imagine what it might look like specifically. When we are finally able to gather together in these spaces, please look around you and recognize your neighbors as living stones.

This image feels especially apt in stone churches like St. Edward and Trinity. The stones really do seem alive, don't they, because of all the hymns and psalms and prayers that have soaked into them.

So we begin with an image of Jesus as a living stone, then proceed to an image of individual Christians, also living stones, being built together into a spiritual house. The many living stones come together to form one church.

Then we come to the stone that the builders rejected. The original passage is from Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." (Psalm 118:22) In Matthew, Jesus himself quotes this passage almost word for word. (Matthew 21:42) The strong implication, understood as such by the chief priests and Pharisees who hear Jesus say this, is that Jesus himself is the stone that the builders rejected, and that the builders who rejected the stone are the Jewish leaders. (Matthew 21:45) Peter quotes the same passage in a speech recorded in Acts 4:11. Here Peter and John are arrested by the priests and the Sadducees for continuing to preach Christ crucified and resurrected, and to heal in his name. The priests and Sadducees ask them, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" In his response Peter changes the line from Psalm 118 slightly. He says to them, "The stone that was rejected by you,

the builders,” making explicit what Jesus had only implied: Those who rejected Jesus were Jewish leaders who not only rejected him but induced the Roman authorities to put him to death. But the rejection is only part of the story. A little earlier in today’s reading, we are told that Jesus, the living stone, was “rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.” (v. 4) Rejected but also chosen and precious. We too are chosen. The recent converts in Asia Minor are told in verse 9, and we are told as well, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” Note that these are all collective nouns, words that refer to numbers of people who together make up a single group. Just as the many living stones from earlier in the lesson are to be built into one spiritual house, we are to gather together as a royal priesthood, a holy nation. The many form one body. The letter goes on to say, “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” This then is our calling in these difficult times, to be built as many living stones into one spiritual house, and to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

Let me return now to the image with which this portion of the letter begins: The readers are told that they are “like newborn infants.” (v. 2) In some ways we are all like the newborn infants being referred to here. We are still at the baby stage when it comes to dealing with COVID 19. The disease is new, and there is an enormous amount we don’t know about it. I keep reading reports from physicians who say they’ve never seen anything like this. It’s not only physicians and epidemiologists and virologists who are just beginning to get a grip on the disease and its effects. For example, I would not want to be a government economist in these difficult times. The decisions they have to make are too consequential. They must decide based on insufficient information, and getting it wrong could be catastrophic. I would not want that responsibility. Other people are struggling as well. Owners of small businesses have to decide whether to hang on and try to tough it out or to give up, go bankrupt – and do what? There are no jobs. There are young two-income couples who are both working at home, trying to do their jobs and simultaneously to home school their children, or at least to keep the kids from going crazy and destroying the house. People furloughed from their jobs are eying their bank balances anxiously and wondering when they’ll be able to go back to work. Churches are worrying over how they’ll make up for the plate offerings that aren’t coming in. We are all in uncharted and frightening territory here; we are all like the

newborns in today's lesson, trying to comprehend an enormous and terrifying new world. Physicians, scientists, economists, ordinary people – we are all just trying to do our best in extraordinary times. Let's all be gentle with one another.

The church doors are locked, but the Trinity bells are still ringing out and the yellow celandine poppies are blooming in the Trinity garden. We cannot gather together in person. But we are worshipping together virtually, and gathering together on line for vestry meetings, and adult forums. We are distributing lunches to our In The Garden neighbors.

Soon, God willing, we will be able to gather together safely in our beautiful spaces made of living stones. Until that longed-for day comes, we pray, "O God make speed to save us; O Lord make haste to help us."

5 Easter, May 10, 2020

Patricia Rugola