

Prayers

To God

Read through some songs of worship with which you are familiar and let them speak to your heart as expressions of worship and love.

For myself

Weekly theme: doing the work of the Gospel

Read some of the parables of Jesus (Matthew 13, or 24) and let them guide your prayers today concerning your own work for the Gospel.

For others

I am amazed, heavenly Father, at the wondrous things You have done in Christ for all who believe. Bless Your people in this world as they seek not to offend people with religion or make friends into 'projects', but to demonstrate the quality of faithful and generous love You offer all who place their trust in You. May the witness we offer be effective and may the love we offer be received. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour: AMEN

Meditation

It is incredible that ordinary people
Should be used by God for His greatest projects

It is extraordinary that poor people
Should be the focus of the Lord's love and passion

It is amazing that the outcasts and sinners
Should be those who greeted Jesus in their homes

It is mind-blowing that the Kingdom of God
Should be like what we know but completely different

It is awesome that God's final judgement
Should vindicate true faith and eliminate all pretence

However, it is not surprising that we have a choice
Whether we should go with Him or take our own way

Our own way sounds rather predictable
But the way of God is nothing less than sensational

Bible Passage

1 Peter 2:4-8

⁴ He is the living Stone, rejected by people but chosen by God and precious to Him, so come to Him, ⁵ and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual temple; and be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it says in Scripture: 'See, I am laying a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.'

⁷ This is precious to you who believe. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the main cornerstone,' ⁸ and, 'A stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the Word, as they were destined to do.

Review

Peter, after calling on those who had been baptised to abandon the ways of the world and appreciate the '*pure spiritual milk*' of the Gospel (2:1-3), now urges his hearers to let Christ be at the centre of their lives. This passage speaks of Christ in a remarkable way, as the foundation stone of a new spiritual '*Temple*', built by God (2:5), and throughout, Peter uses the Old Testament (2:6,7,8) to drive home his point that Christ is at the centre of Gospel faith. Without Christ, there is no church, no faith and no salvation.

This whole passage speaks of Christ as the starting point of all faith, '*the living stone, rejected by people but chosen by God and precious to Him*' (2:4). He describes Christ as the '*cornerstone*' (2:6,7), the basis of a '*spiritual temple*' (2:5) without which, Christian faith has no meaning (2:8). This is powerful scripture, which yields some fascinating ideas. However, Peter describes Christ like this because many religions of his day started people at one place, but intentionally led them on to deeper, more 'interesting' spiritual truths, and for many in the Roman world, the starting point of religion was coincidental. Important things were found at the end, not the beginning, but Peter now turns all this on its head!

His basic theme here is that Christ is God's chosen and precious '*cornerstone*' (2:4) on which the new church of God's people is built. This is the community into which the baptised enter, '*like living stones*', to be '*built into a spiritual temple, and be a holy priesthood ...*' (2:5). These potent ideas link straight back to the Gospels (Matt 12:6, 24:1,2), for the chief accusations made against Jesus at His trial was that he claimed he would '*destroy the temple and build it in three days*' (Matt 26:61)! Nevertheless, all these ideas can be traced back to the Old Testament, notably to Isaiah 28:16 '*See, I am laying in Zion a tested stone, a precious cornerstone ...*' (2:6), Psalm 118:22 '*The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone ...*' (2:7), and Isaiah 8:14 '*He will be a sanctuary, a stumbling-stone, a trap and a snare ...*' (2:8).

Here, Peter tells us that although His own people '*stumbled*' over Him, Jesus was God's '*precious*' and only Son, and the beginning of His 'post resurrection' work. How often do we need to be reminded of the preciousness of Christ? Every New Testament writer says the same: Paul urges us to believe the resurrection (1Cor 15:12f.); John declares his Gospel is written '*so we might believe in Him*' (John 20:31); Luke says he writes '*so that you may know the truth*' about Christ (Luke 1:4). We need these reminders now because without Christ we

have no peace with God in God, no salvation, and no blessing of His Spirit, and neither would we understand that we are to be united as one people, one *'temple'* (2:5) with a single commission (2:5). Of course, some find this all very difficult, but this is scripture!

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V4

Most translations have the words 'come to Him' at the beginning of the sentence. However, the Greek sentence is quite long and complex, and there is no reason why they should not come at the end; the words are the same, and it adds to the force of what Peter says.

Also, the word 'chose' is the same one used to describe God's chosen people as 'elect' (Greek; 'eklektos'). Christ is God's 'chosen' Messiah and we are His 'chosen' people.

V5

The word for 'temple' (Greek 'oikos') is often translated as 'house', but can also mean household, people, sanctuary or Temple! The range of meaning of this call from Peter is therefore very wide! It is most probable, however, that he means that God's people are a 'temple' because of the attached adjective 'spiritual'.

V7 ***'main cornerstone'***

Other translations:

'capstone' (NIV)

'very head of the corner' (NRSV)

The 'main cornerstone' is a strange word. The normal word for 'cornerstone' (Greek 'akrogonias') has already occurred in verse 6, but here the expression is 'kephalen gonias' meaning the main cornerstone or capstone. The capstone is the last stone which finishes off a building! Because of the reference to stumbling, it is best thought of here as the first cornerstone set on the ground from which all others take their place. This does not mean, however, that it does not also mean the final capstone as well – but that is in the future!

V8

The Greek word for 'stumbling' is 'skandalon', which has obvious connections with the idea of 'scandal', or something which causes a blockage or causes offense

Further Comments

The Living Stone and the Spiritual Temple (2:4,5)

This entire section of 1 Peter is dominated by the idea of Christ as a stone, and in the second half of the passage (which we will look at shortly), Peter quotes from the Old Testament some

of the passages which describe Jesus as a some kind of 'stone'. What is different in Peter's letter is the way in which he describes Jesus as the 'Living Stone' (2:4), and then goes on to talk about Christian people as 'living stones' (2:5).

Firstly, when Peter added the word 'Living' to the already well known idea of Jesus as a stone (see Acts 4:11; Eph 2:20), it was a unique description which may well have come from Peter's own experience. When Peter had been challenged by Jesus to say 'who do you say I am', he had said 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!' (Matt 16:16). As well as his declaration that Jesus was the Messiah, it was Peter's use of the word 'living' which was unique. It is possible that Peter had remembered this and it was part of his own personal testimony to talk of Jesus as the 'Living God', and hence the 'Living Stone'.

Following on from this, Peter called on the converts he was addressing to be 'living stones' themselves. Certainly, no one could forget Christ if they were actively following in His footsteps! So Peter took three Old Testament ideas to drive home his message in a dramatic way. He described them as 'a Temple', as a 'holy priesthood' and as people 'offering spiritual sacrifices'! All of these are central to our understanding of the faith of the people of Israel. The Temple was the building in which God's people worshipped, and was thought of as the very dwelling place of God. The priesthood was performed by a special group of people chosen from the tribe of Levi and descending from Aaron; they served the people by representing them to God, and they served God by representing Him to the people. The sacrificial offerings offered by the priests were the means of worship of God's people which were performed to remove sins, and also to share in fellowship and celebrate national festival occasions.

A new temple

By means of this example, Peter explained to the converts of the early church that those who believed in Jesus Christ and were baptised fulfilled these roles in a new way. They were built up into a new Temple which was the Church. They were a 'holy priesthood' dedicated to the service of God to bring Him to the world and also to intercede for the people of the world before God; a ministry of evangelism and service. In addition, they were to be people who were themselves 'spiritual sacrifices of worship to God, wholly given to the Lord.

Over the centuries, much has been made of verse 5 of this text; from justification of the priesthood in the church, and the 'priesthood of all believers' for example. Nevertheless, we must start with this simple idea that we are called to be just like Jesus, the Living Stone.

The 'cornerstone'

Verses 6 to 8 contain the three Old Testament passages of scripture used by Peter, as quoted above. Peter put the three together to explain what would have otherwise seemed inexplicable in his own day; the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, and the need to start a new 'church' to be the new People of God. The prophet Isaiah had said two things, firstly that the Messiah would be like a 'cornerstone' (Isaiah 28:16). This prophecy was given by Isaiah in a prophetic vision, and is part of a group of prophecies which are described as 'apocalyptic' because they speak about days far in advance of Isaiah's own day, even beyond the return of exiles from Babylon (see Isaiah 13,14). In these prophecies Isaiah spoke about God's work of redemption and recreation, and the early Christians thought this prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and the creation of the church as the new Temple and dwelling place of God.

However, Isaiah had also spoken about 'a stone which makes people stumble' in one of his earlier prophecies, and at some point someone (perhaps Peter?) must have noticed that this prophecy in Isaiah 8 was said about the child who was named 'Immanuel', that is 'God with us' (see earlier in the same chapter - Isaiah 8:10). From Peter's point of view, this explained

why the people of Israel had rejected Jesus as their Messiah; they had 'stumbled' over the stone, just as Isaiah had prophesied!

A rejected stone

This in turn leads us on to the third enigmatic text from the Old Testament found in Psalm 118, which explains a turn around, whereby the rejected stone which has been stumbled over (i.e. Christ) was used by God as the 'main cornerstone' (or capstone – see above) to set out the building of a new Temple. You can see that the three texts work together and come to the same conclusion about Jesus, the Jews and the foundation of the Church.

As I mentioned previously, this whole passage has been used to develop all kinds of ideas about the church, but we must start with what Peter was trying to say to the converts of the early church whom he was addressing. For them, rejection by the Jews was still a sensitive issue. Some of them had been Jews themselves and may have had to come out of Jewish families in order to become Christians. It was of great importance to them that they had all this explained to them, and Peter sought to help them by explaining it from scripture. He also helped them understand that this rejection was but the beginning of God's new work through them, and that by following Jesus, they fulfilled God's purposes from the Old Testament, which they still regarded as their own scripture.

Discipleship

Application

We are God's dwelling place on earth!

The idea that we are the Temple of God, the place of His dwelling on earth is powerful. God of course can live anywhere He pleases, and He is to be found throughout His creation. Nevertheless, sin and evil are found throughout the world and God is at war with all the forces of evil. For that reason His 'home' is with His people, those who own His name, and in that sense we can feel honoured and privileged. In my youth, I met some Christians who tried to convince me that because God was everywhere in His creation, He was not present within His church in any greater sense than He was anywhere else. They said this in order to be rebellious against the church, but they were wrong, certainly according to what it says in the Bible. Home, for God as well as us, is different from where we work!

Being God's people

This text also tells us that as God's people, we have a work to do in the world which is the same as that of Christ; He is the Living Stone, and we are 'living stones'. Our job as a 'holy priesthood' is to be the means whereby God can show Himself in the world; we are to be visible, available and also vulnerable in the world for the sake of the Gospel, just as Jesus was. However, we must also pray for the world and intercede for it because we are still a part of this world. Intercession is our privilege and duty; it is not something God's people should easily forget or dismiss just because the world is a difficult place. We have a ministry to the world.

Unity in Christ

In this passage, Peter gives a call for God's people to live in the unity of Jesus Christ, and he gives a warning at the end about the consequences of stumbling away from Christ. Those who stumble have a different destiny from that of those who trust in Him alone (2:8), and it is not heaven. Today, too many people are stumbling because they have forgotten Jesus or

rebelled against God's Word. In the midst of such times, the challenge for the Church is to stay close to its Lord.

Ideas for what to do

- *Reflect on what it means to you to be a 'spiritual Temple' or dwelling place of God, remembering that God loves to live with you. Does this make a difference to you? If so, what?*
- *If possible, discuss with a leader of your church what the church understands by the phrase 'a holy priesthood'. Check out what you learn with this passage of scripture.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Peter describes us as 'living stones'. What does this tell us about Christian faith? How does this image speak to us today?
2. Do you believe that the Church today is secure in Christ in the way that Peter describes?
3. Can you think of ways in which people stumble over the 'rock which is Christ'? What can we do about this to help prevent this stumbling?

Final Prayer

You have washed me, Lord Jesus. Washed me for cleanness, and washed me for work; washed me for healing and washed me for service. Help me to fulfil my calling through Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit live out my calling to the end of my life. Thank You Lord Jesus. **AMEN**