

Living Stones and a Royal Priesthood

1 Peter 2: 4-10

As you come to him, 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.”

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

But 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. 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.

What does it mean to be a church when our buildings are closed for public worship?

When I ask people about why we need churches in our communities, people often respond with why our buildings are so significant. They are havens of peace and their architecture speaks of God. But that is not what I am asking. The question I am interested in is why the church – the family of God, the Body of Christ is important in this day and age.

With our buildings closed we have the chance to live out being church as living stones and a royal priesthood.

2000 years ago, the Temple was central to Jewish worship and identity. Children were presented there and prayers were offered by priests who were set apart for the purpose.

Jesus threatened this structure. When his friends pointed out how impressive the temple was and how massive the stones were Jesus predicted its destruction (Mark 13:1-2). For Peter – one of Jesus’ closest friends – Jesus is the foundation of the new Temple. He was rejected, but became the cornerstone.

Jesus was not a priest. He was not of the tribe of Levi: he was descended from Judah and the line of the Kings of Israel. The priests were of the line of Aaron – the brother of Moses – and they were Levites. In his lifetime Jesus was known as a teacher (rabbi). However, after his death and resurrection Jesus’ followers saw him as the great high priest (Hebrews 4:14): the one who empathises with all our weakness and presents us to God the Father.

The passage above from 1 Peter takes this further. We are the living stones – the temple – we are the royal priesthood.

What does it mean to be Living Stones?

We are to be the foundation of a new understanding of humanity based on love for all people.

In Ephesians 2 it says that the wall that came down was the one that divided Jews from non-Jews – or gentiles as we are known. Humans build walls that define differences. In some cases, these are literal – just as Donald Trump has called for between the USA and Mexico, or like Hadrian's Wall between England and Scotland. We build walls between rival football fans. In other cases, they are imagined but no less real. We build barriers based on race, gender, and social class. In recent years we have divided ourselves over Brexit.

Jesus breaks down these barriers as the first step in reconciliation. We are no longer Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female: we are children of God.

The next step is one of rebuilding. This building needs to be open and inclusive. The new building is full of the Holy Spirit and love. If we are the living stones the worship that God requires is set out in Micah 6.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

We can be the new temple as we demonstrate our care for all people. At this time when our buildings are closed, we are the church by serving and loving our neighbours.

- We are not the people who panic buy and hoard more than we need.
- We are those who share.
- We stand with our neighbours who have lost their jobs and are worried about their futures.

What does it mean to be a Royal Priesthood?

The priests had a representative role of the whole people to God and of God to the people.

They attended to their purity so they could worship God in holiness. Holiness means being set apart. They were able to bring the requests of the people to God and the commands of God to the people. In Zechariah 3, Joshua the High Priest stands accused of all the sins of Israel before God and is forgiven. His dirty clothes are removed and replaced. Joshua is told that all the sins have been wiped away.

As a royal priesthood, we are asked to offer worship to God and to pray to him. We are here to lift the prayers of all people and to communicate back what God is saying.

But there is a crucial difference between then and now. Then this was the role of a select few, now we are not only to pray, but to empower all to pray.

Jesus' disciples had to ask him how to pray. What they learnt from Jesus was that they could speak directly to our Father directly. We are to enable all people to pray and help them to hear for themselves what God is calling us to do.

The final priestly role is reconciliation. In Zechariah 3, Joshua is told that the removal of sin from the people will result in people inviting their neighbours to sit under their vines and their fig trees. The priestly role is to bring about a healthy society.

Why Church?

We are Living Stones and a Royal Priesthood and our role is to bring about reconciliation in our society by demonstrating love, enabling sharing, worshipping the one who saves us, and offering prayers.

Our goal is the same as that of God himself – the reconciliation of all people.