

## For the Display of His Splendour: Church

10th May 2020

1 PETER 2: 4-12

“Our buildings may be closed, but the church is alive.” Those are the last words at the end of a video which has been flying across social media in the last week. The UK Blessing is beautiful song produced by many Christian musicians from different churches and denominations across the country, offering a sung blessing from God over the UK during this time of lockdown and coronavirus. It is a powerful demonstration that the church is alive, and that God is with us!

Peter uses a building metaphor in this passage to describe what it means to be God’s people, to be his church. Perhaps that seems contradictory since Christians seem to so often insist God’s church is not a building, but are His people living for Him wherever they find themselves.

However this metaphor is incredibly helpful, so this morning we are going to concentrate on verses 4 to 6 but also draw on some of the other verses from our reading. And we are going to consider three things.

1. Our Foundation
2. Our Identity
3. Our Purpose

When I was growing up my mum used to make the most amazing plum pie. It was my Sunday lunch favourite! And every time she made it, she produced this little china black bird that would sit in the middle of the pie holding the shortcrust pastry up, stopping it from sinking into the plum and allowing the pie to breathe! Without the little black bird mum’s plum pie became more like plum mush!

Our passage today describes Jesus in verse 1 as the living stone, as a chosen and precious cornerstone – Peter says He is OUR FOUNDATION. Without Him there is no church. Like my mum’s little china bird, he holds everything together, he is the most important stone in the building that is church! During a time of suffering and displacement this would have been hugely encouraging to the Christians Peter was writing to because it meant that wherever they were, and whatever they were facing they could depend on Christ to hold everything together – they could, as verse 6 says, trust Him completely.

Peter’s readers would have understood this metaphor of buildings – the building they were most familiar with in Zion (Jerusalem) would have been the temple. They knew its history, and they knew its purpose because the temple had been instituted by God for His people. IT was their foundation, the place where He dwelt and it defined them as belonging to Him as they came to worship, offer sacrifices. It was the place where God lived and His glory could be seen!

But you see, God’s people thought the temple was indestructible, and Peter quotes Isaiah 28 verse 16 to remind God’s people that when the physical temple is gone the only security that people can rely and depend on is His chosen and precious cornerstone. Is Christ himself. When the physical building no longer stands, He is the true foundation to be relied on. He is the cornerstone! The cornerstone is the focal point of a building. IT is the biggest, strongest stone on which a building depends for

its structural integrity. IT holds the rest of the building securely in place. And Christ isn't just like a large inert piece of marble – He is the living stone! Made alive through his resurrection and offering life to all those who trust Him.

We may be missing our church building to gather in during this season, but in the end meeting in beautiful buildings, whether ST Swithin's or the Abbey or Canterbury Cathedral or wherever is not what makes God's people the church – it is those that depend entirely on the Cornerstone, that is Christ for everything they need that are God's church.

He is our foundation, and as His people WE HAVE AN IDENTITY. Vs 5 – “we are like living stones, being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.”

For many we consider our identity to be defined by what we do – a teacher, a parent, a retired doctor or whatever. But this is not what Peter tells us is our identity in this passage.

We are instead living stones – a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession and the people of God. That is who we are. And each one of us is an essential and valuable contribution to the new living spiritual house that is the church! We are a household, one huge family of God – whatever our background and our nationality and all with a role to play - each of us with His living spirit dwelling within us as transforming us to be more like the precious Cornerstone that is the living and active Jesus Christ. We are united together in Him...That is who we are!

Next to us in Saltford a huge estate is being developed, sprouting new homes all over the place, and extending into the countryside – Each brick laid one on top of another, together producing a home, a safe place for someone to live. Each brick is essential and so too are we as living stones at St Siwthins. Each of us is precious to God, a member of his household, His brothers and sisters of Christ and we cannot be His church without each other.

Peter identifies God's church as a holy priesthood – Peter's readers would have understood that reference - it would have reminded them of the temple, and the Great High Priest who was chosen by God to go into the most holy place in the Temple once a year to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people that they might be forgiven for their sin! No other Israelite could enter the holy of holies and meet with God in this way because no other Israelite was pure enough to be in the presence of God – Peter describes all God's people as priests because we no longer need a priest to mediate on our behalf. Jesus, our Great High Priest, has dealt with our sin for all time, made us holy and pure so that we might live constantly in the presence of God. That is who we are! We are God's people, his children who enjoy can enjoy his company for ever.

So, finally, WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE? Primarily, we need to depend on the cornerstone! Because without Him we will, rather like my mum's plum pie collapse into a heap rather than be built into a beautiful living spiritual house!

Our purpose isn't to bring offerings of bulls and goats to a building or to someone else in order to have our sins forgiven but instead to offer ourselves to God, rejoicing that Christ, as the writer of Hebrews tells us has offered “for all time one sacrifice for sins.” We are forgiven and his people.

Paul writes in Romans that we are “to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” and as verse 9 says, to declare the praises of all that He has done for

us in taking us from darkness to light and making us into the people of God that we have been called to be!

During lockdown, many of us may have been struggling with our purpose! IT might feel that everything has been stripped away, and that we are left wondering what on earth we can do that's purposeful and useful when we are stuck indoors most of the day. These verse are simple and clear. We are called to praise the one who has saved us! We are called to offer him our lives on a daily basis, and to live for Him, serve Him and keep Him as the foundation of all. We are called to honour him with our Good deeds and bring glory to him in all we do. We are called to be holy and abstain from sin. That's what it means to be church....and in a time when we can't gather, we can praise Him in our homes, we can talk about him with our children, or those we live with, we can see him in the colours of spring and in our daily walks. We can thank Him for friends, and family and for giving us one another as St Swithin's. We can give generously to those in need and take care of the neighbour's arounds us. And instead of wishing lockdown away, we can spend time in His word, talking and listening to Him and growing and thriving as living stones, and as members of His church, ready for the time when we will once again be able to gather together.

At a time when many in our world are feeling fearful and hopeless, consumed with anxiety about the virus and how it will affect their future God's Church has an opportunity to shine brightly in the darkness for Christ!

One church leader described the church as the Hope for the World – And that is what we are and what we are called to be! A vast and beautiful living spiritual home where we depend entirely on the Cornerstone, trusting Him, secure in Him, relying on him in good times and in times of strain and struggle. A beautiful spiritual house, towering over the Bath skyline with all the other Christians in the city – a beacon of light shining in the darkness, made up of many living stones all of which are the People of God, bringing, on His behalf hope to the lost, love to the lonely, healing to the sick and new life to the despairing! For that, St Swithin's church is who we are!

## **Prayer**

“Christ is our cornerstone, the one on whom we depend. In him we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.”

Father, may we be who you have called us to be. May we daily lean on Christ, our cornerstone, trusting in Him entirely for all we need, all we are concerned about and for all those we love? Please fill us afresh with your holy spirit that we might together live for you and shine brightly as your church in Bath, pointing others to the Lord Jesus and serving one another as we serve you. **Amen**