

## **God's own people – 1 Peter 2:2-10**

Our second reading today comes from the first letter of Peter... and he gives us a lot of ideas and a lot of imagery and all of those ideas and images – newborn babies, spiritual milk, living stones and cornerstones, spiritual houses and sacrifices, priesthoods and nations, and so on, are all packed into a very short passage. It can be overwhelming.

Of course, most of the New Testament letters are written by the apostle Paul – about 77 pages in my home bible.

But as well as the letters of Paul, we have the letter to the Hebrews whose authorship we don't know, the letter of James, the three letters of John, the letter of Jude, and the two letters of Peter. Together, the non-Paul letters make up only around 29 pages - well under half the amount written by Paul.

By biblical standards, Paul wrote a lot: and so it's natural that we get used to reading and listening to Paul's letters.

Paul was an educated man - a lawyer, a Pharisee, and someone trained to write and present arguments, and do so well and effectively. As we read Paul's letters, we can get a sense of this. He is organised, he is structured, his writing is well planned. He makes a point, he argues the case supporting it, he raises a hypothetical objection to it, and then rebuts that objection, and moves on to the next point. And so on.

By contrast, Peter, the author of today's second reading comes from quite a different background to Paul. Far from being a Pharisee, Peter was a fisherman. We read in Matthew 4 that Peter and his brother Andrew were called by Jesus to follow him. The brothers were likely running a small business, not only fishing, but taking their

catches to market, at least maintaining - if not building - boats and nets, paying taxes, employing others and so on. Maybe not the formal, legal education of Paul, but certainly practical skills – and practical people skills, communication skills, as well.

Peter wasn't a trained writer or communicator like Paul, but from the accounts we have in the gospels and the book of Acts, he certainly wasn't afraid to speak up or to speak out.

We see in the gospel accounts that Peter was a man of immense faith – he was the first to recognise Jesus as the messiah, he trusted Jesus, and he backed up that trust with action – he stepped out onto the lake to walk toward Jesus, and he was also the one ready with a sword in the garden of Gethsemane to fight against the arrest of Jesus (John 17:10).

But as well as being a man of immense faith and action, he was human. When Jesus was arrested, when things were looking bad for all Jesus' followers, he denied being one of Jesus' disciples.

And then, after the resurrection, after turning back and being accepted by Jesus, alive with the Holy Spirit, he was the apostle who got up and preached the first sermon on Pentecost.

You could never say that Peter lacked passion.

And I think that really shows in this this morning's letter.

Unlike the carefully argued letters of Paul, Peter blurts out his ideas. Lurching between concepts and mixing the imagery; getting his thoughts down with a passion that reflects his own passion for Jesus.

But amongst the rush of ideas, beautiful words that capture beautiful ideas. In verse 9, he says "...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.” Just ponder that for a moment: Isn’t that beautiful? Not just in what Peter says, but in how he says it. The same man who once said to Jesus “You are the messiah” says to us “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood...”.

But before we get to that, Peter covers a lot of ground in just a few verses! He starts off by telling us that just like newborn babies we must crave pure spiritual milk. Peter isn’t talking about us as being newborn infants in the sense of being ‘born again’, but the importance of the thing being craved. To a newborn, just about the only thing that matters, is milk. And milk is the only thing that will satisfy a new-born.

That’s the sort of desire that Peter tells us we should have for God; for knowing God, for experiencing God, and for sharing God. We might think we want lots of things, but when it comes down to it, what we need is God. Peter says “you have tasted that the Lord is good.” (2:3)

So come to him says Peter, “the living Stone”. And our living Stone is Jesus – rejected by humans – but chosen and precious to God. Remember the words of God the Father in the gospels “This is my son, whom I love”. Jesus is the precious *only begotten Son of God*; but Jesus was – and is – rejected by most people.

Peter says to those scattered Christians he was writing to – and to us today – “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house” (2:5) So while Jesus is the Living Stone, we can be living stones too. To be part of what is being built – a spiritual house.

Peter talks about a ‘spiritual house’ of living stones – the assembly of believers – the church! What would become known as the *one, holy,*

*catholic and apostolic church*. We are now part of that spiritual house that Peter wrote about!

And not only are we part of that spiritual house, but we are also “to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”.

You’ll remember, that in Old Testament times, there was a caste of priests, who ran the temple, and were entitled to make sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. And the sacrifices in those times included calves and lambs and doves, which would be offered to God in ritual slaughter.

But that’s all changed, Peter tells us, just like there’s no need for a stone temple, there’s no need for a separate class of priests and neither is there any need to spill blood in our sacrifices. We get to make our own sacrifices, and our sacrifices are spiritual ones. We have examples of what spiritual sacrifices are elsewhere in the bible – praise (Hebrews 13:15), prayer (Rev 5:8), self-consecration – setting ourselves apart for God (Romans 12:1, Phil 2:17), benevolence (Rom 15:27, Heb 13:16) and giving (2 Cor 9:12, Phil 4:18). And, because we make those sacrifices through Jesus, we can be assured that they are acceptable to God.

Peter might have been a self-educated fisherman, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t know his scriptures: In verse 6 he quotes Isaiah (28:16) and in verse 7 he quotes Psalm 118 (v22), linking back to the imagery of the stone. He has referred to Jesus as the living Stone already, and now he refers to him as the cornerstone and a stone that causes people to stumble.

#cornerstone

The cornerstone is not only an important structural stone in a building, but it's also the stone which gives shape to the building. Jesus as the cornerstone gives shape to our spiritual house; modern Christians often concentrate on saying that the church is not a building, the church is the people, and that's sort of true, but it's not the full picture. We might be the living stones that make up the spiritual house, but the spiritual house has its shape because Jesus is its cornerstone. We are the church; but Jesus is the head of the church.

On the other hand, though, Peter tells us that if people reject Jesus, then they're lost. Rather than Jesus providing shape for their lives, their rejection of him becomes that which "causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."

Peter puts it quite simply: "They stumble because they disobey the message".

So, while we know from John's gospel "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him will not die but have eternal life", the scriptures tell us, and our experience shows us the sad truth: that there will be those who turn away from God, so while all people can turn to Jesus and be saved, not all will.

But for us who choose to turn to Jesus, Peter assures us that "[We] are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession..." It is not so much a reward for accepting Christ, but a consequence of accepting Christ. Those who come to him – the living Stone – are special, we are the living stones that make up the spiritual house, and we also have a special mission, says Peter: "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

We don't need to be ordained to be priests, we don't need to ritually purify ourselves to offer our spiritual sacrifices, or even pray particular prayers to be part of that holy nation. Because we turn to Jesus, we are people claimed by God as his own.

And we who have received the good news, are called on to share that good news. When we receive good news, we want to share it. A child or grandchild does well at school – we tell our friends, someone gets a promotion or a new job – they tell their friends, our sporting team has a win – we tell people about it.

Do we do the same with the good news of Jesus, though? Maybe it's old news, maybe people have tired of hearing it... but isn't being a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and people called by God pretty special? Shouldn't we be sharing it?

Jesus words in Matthew's gospel are clear: Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt 28:18-20a)

That great commission was given by Jesus to the disciples, including Peter, just before Jesus was taken up into heaven, and it's that commission that Peter passes on in this letter – that commission that he passes on to us.

How do we "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"? How do we share the good news of Jesus with the people all around us?

My hope – my prayer – is that St Ives Uniting is one day packed with worshippers. And so are all the churches across Sydney and across the world.

How do we do that? We share the good news. We open our doors so that people can come in, and we can invite people in, and we can welcome them. And we open our doors so that we can go out. Out into the community. Out into the world. Out to the ends of the earth. Well, maybe not to the ends of the earth, because really, we don't have to go far to find people who haven't heard the good news, people who don't know Jesus.

We aren't people who just go to church – or at least we shouldn't be. And we aren't people who just have an interest in Jesus – an exclusive club of Jesus fans that meets in private on Sunday mornings. We are the living stones of a spiritual house given shape by our saviour Jesus. Each one of us is part of that spiritual temple. We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people claimed by God for his own, to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Amen