

Living Stones

In the name of him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, dear friends in Christ: Referring to some of life's great inconsistencies, the inspired writer of Ecclesiastes tells us, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, a time to die; a time to sow seed, and time to gather what was sown; a time to kill, and a time to heal ...", and so the passage goes on in the same contrasting dual pattern, showing that our lives are often nothing more than repeated cycles of doing and undoing essentially the same activities. I'm sure you're familiar with the passage – or at least with a once popular musical adaptation of it by a sixties rock group called the Byrds (Turn, turn, turn...). In any case, as I read this morning's Epistle lesson, I was reminded of one of the parallel lines in that passage that goes, "[There is] a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together." Or to say it another way, sometimes stones are good things and you want them, and sometimes stones are bad, and you want to get rid of them.

And if you've ever been to Palestine (or just seen a few photographs of it) you have a pretty good idea of what Solomon meant. The soil there is so full of rocks and stones it's a wonder that they are able to get anything to grow at all. In ancient times, when all the work was done by hand, I'm sure a big part of every farmer's life was removing stones from the fields. And it would have been an ongoing battle – a constant source of frustration – especially considering with the way even the deepest stones seem always to float up to the top of the soil. If you can imagine breaking your wooden plow several times when working even a small field, you might capture a bit of how the typical farmer felt about "casting away all those confounded stones". But then, on the other hand, stones were the basic building material for most homes and other structures. And my guess is that when people wanted to build something, suddenly there weren't enough stones to go around. If you've ever spread gravel you know how that works. What looks like a huge mountain of material just doesn't go very far when you start to spread it. The same is true for all building materials (and checking account balances). So when it came time to build your home, gathering enough stones together to do the job would have been a lot of hard work. And if you were a farmer, like most people were, your attitude about all those infernal rocks might change. Like they say, "One man's trash is another man's treasure" – and in this case, it's the same guy!

Well, it occurred to me that it's also in *metaphor* that stones can be good or bad. For example, one way to say that a family is very wealthy is to refer to them as the "Got-rocks". There, rocks mean money – and most of us would agree that's a good thing. And there's one insurance outfit uses the Rock of Gibraltar as its company symbol. It's supposed to represent the company's strength and stability. On the other hand, I remember once taking a psychology class in which the instructor said that we all have these emotional baskets we carry around with us. And every time someone says something critical or that hurts your feelings, it's like they put a heavy "negative rock" in your basket that you have to carry around with you. We were admonished not to burden others with lots of "negative rocks" lest the load become too heavy for them to bear.

The Bible is also full of both positive and negative metaphorical uses of stones. For example, God gave Moses the Law written on stone tablets in an age when most

writing was done on clay tablets. It was a way for him to say that the Law was fixed and unchangeable: it couldn't be altered or erased like words on clay. But the Law could be broken – as Moses showed when he came into the camp of the Israelites and saw everyone worshipping an idol. He threw down the stone tablets, shattering them, as a way of showing what the people had done to the Law. They had broken it all to pieces with their sin. But even broken the Law still had the power to accuse and condemn. It's not a coincidence that the way God commanded his people to execute convicted criminals in capital cases was to stone them to death. The idea was that the hurled stones were like the broken fragments of the Law the criminal had violated. When a man was stoned the picture was that the Law was killing him. And finally, another negative way the Bible uses the metaphor of stones is to say that certain people have "hearts of stone". It was a way of saying that they are hardened sinners who refuse to repent. So we find a lot of different ways in which God uses the idea of stones to reveal sacred truths to us.

And today's Epistle is yet another example. In it St. Peter says that we, the believers in Jesus, are the stones of a new Temple that is currently under construction. We are being carefully assembled and joined together into the walls and courtyards of a living building designed for the worship and glory of God. And to help us understand what this new, living Temple is all about, it will be good to take a look at the old Temple that King Solomon built in Jerusalem of literal, cold, hard stone, and do a comparison.

That Temple was built of the finest stone available: fresh cut and carefully shaped limestone from select quarries throughout the land. The quarries closest to Jerusalem were deemed unfit. Their limestone was of inferior quality, so the master craftsmen rejected it for Temple use. So the stones, some weighing many tons, had to be hauled in from some distance. They were put together with great skill into the massive Temple complex, the center of which was the very impressive House of God. It was given a dazzling white marble finish. And the ornate crowns of its pillars were covered in gold.

But as magnificent as the Temple was, its primary purpose was to stand as a barrier between God and man. The holy presence of God's glory dwelt in the center of the Temple, completely unapproachable to sinful humans. It was wonderful, of course, that God himself would condescend to dwell with his people; but his people could only get so close to him—and that was for their own good, not his. The thick walls of God's House and the many layers of courts also surrounded by walls that you had to pass through to get there, were all meant to protect sinful humans from coming into direct contact with God in his glory – because for them that would have meant instant death.

Now, the Lord *could be* approached, but only at certain specified times, by select people, and according to the conditions that God himself had prescribed. And these conditions always included sacrifice. For people to come to God, atonement for sin had to be made. And because the Law demands the death of the sinner, the only atonement possible is death. But in his grace and mercy, God allowed something else (an animal) to die in the place of a sinner. Its shed blood satisfied the requirement of death for the person who wanted to approach the Lord; but even then, the person could only get so close. If you were not a Jew, you could only come as close as the outer court. A Jewish woman or a child could only approach as far as the next stone barrier. The next wall was as far as most Jewish men could go – you had to be a priest of the tribe of Levi to pass beyond that wall. And even these priests still couldn't come into the full presence

of God. Only the high priest could do that, and then only on one day in the whole year – and only after making a lot of special sacrifices, and even then, he certainly could not remain there in God’s presence.

That was the Temple made of stone. The stones were barriers between God and man. But all that changes in the new Temple that St. Peter describes in this morning’s reading. He writes, “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.” The living Stone he refers to is Jesus Christ to whom we come to in faith. He was rejected by men: specifically, by the priests and leaders of the Jewish nation – whose very job it was to offer sacrifices to God to atone for sin. They did that when they handed him over to the Romans to be crucified—which crucifixion took place at Golgotha. Most of us imagine that as a picturesque little knoll with three crosses and a pretty sunset. But that’s not what it was. Archeologists have identified a rock quarry outside the old city wall as Golgotha. It was basically a hole carved out of the hillside. At the time of Christ, it was being used as the city trash dump. And it was, incidentally, one of the quarries rejected for use as the source of stones for the Temple.

So, it was here, in an amphitheater of rejected stone where the city’s refuse was thrown that the Lord of glory was also thrown out and destroyed. Even God the Father rejected him here because he bore the shame and disgrace of our sin. Like Moses throwing down God’s perfect Law and breaking it because of the people’s sin, here God threw down and shattered his Son, the Word of God, on account of our sin. But rather than accuse and condemn us like the broken fragments of the Law on stone, Jesus was the true flesh and blood sacrifice of atonement to which all the previous foreshadowing sacrifices had been pointing. His blood truly cleanses us from sin and removes the barriers that separate us from God. This was shown on the day of resurrection. You remember how the women who went to the tomb wondered, “Who will roll away the stone?” so that they could get to the Lord’s body. They were surprised to see that the stone had already been removed. The barrier of hard rock was gone. God removed it when he took *the Stone* (Jesus) whom he had previously cast away, back up out of the earth. *The Stone’s* willing sacrifice for our sin made him that much more precious in his Father’s sight, so he collected him up again and set him up as the Cornerstone of the new Temple: The Stone that all the others line up on. And now he is gathering the rest of the stones he needs to finish the job.

And so, Peter says, you are the stones of God’s House. You used to be like those miserable stones out in the farmer’s field: worthless, unwanted, covered in dirt, in the way, just a source of irritation to the Farmer, only fit to be cast out. But that changed because you came to the Living Stone. And that wasn’t by your choice: what happened is that he chose you to be part of his new Temple project.

He did it by bringing you to life by faith. In a spiritual sense you were a cold, dead rock. But through his Word he brought you to life – just like he did with the initial Creation, which was nothing more than a cold, dead rock until he started speaking to it. Through the Word he showed you your sin and its consequences – and he also proclaimed to you the good news of life in Jesus Christ. Knowing and trusting him brought you life because he is the way, the truth, and the life. And trusting in his Gospel, you were cleaned up and shaped so that you could be fit into the wall of his House.

And the image of this Temple tells us a lot about what it means to live as a Christian. First, there is the idea of inclusion and equality. With all the barriers gone, nothing stands between you and God. Instead, as part of the wall of the Temple, you are the point of contact between God and the rest of Creation. This idea is further amplified as Peter says, “you are a royal priesthood.” Men, women, children, Jews, Gentiles – the distance between God and each one of us is the same: zero. We are all his appointed kings and high priests. In Christ, no one has any right to be closer to God than anyone else. And there’s also the idea of permanence. Walls don’t move. In the old temple, priests and people only came for brief visits with God; but the stones in the wall were always there basking in his glory. Those stones are us, never separated from the holy presence of God.

Secondly, we get the idea of incorporation and unification. We go from being scattered fragments buried in the dirt – everyone out doing their own conflicting and self-destructive things, to be part of a harmonious union bound together in mutual support and strength. Every stone rests on others for support and in turn helps hold up still others. It’s a picture of how Christ empowers us by his Spirit to live and work together in his love with mutual love for one another. We need each other – and if just one stone is missing, it leaves a hole that weakens the entire wall. No one is expendable.

And finally, we get the idea of utility and purpose. Every stone in a building has a place and function, though not all the stones have the same function. So it is with us in the church. There’s a proper place and job for everyone. But in a greater sense we have a collective purpose. Every building is constructed to do something. Even so, God has assembled us together for a reason – he has a goal in mind. The first Temple of cold stone was to be a place of bloody sacrifice to atone for sin. That mission has been fulfilled by Jesus. Our new Temple of living stone, Peter tells us, is for offering ourselves as spiritual sacrifices in Christ. Those sacrifices include, on one hand, our prayers of thanks and our praises for all that he has done in calling us out of the darkness and into his wonderful light. But it also includes our giving of time, and effort, and resources to help each other in every way, and to spread the Gospel of salvation to those who have yet to hear how God wants to include them also in his new Temple.

And one day the new Temple, the House of God, will be complete. There God will dwell with us forever in the fullness of his glory. And I’m sure that it will be a magnificent construction far surpassing anything we have ever imagined, as it will be made up of all God’s faithful people throughout the ages.

In this morning’s Gospel Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms ... I go there to prepare a place for you.” And he is even now preparing that place with you as one of its living stones. May he give us the continued grace to be part of it, to fulfill our role its construction, and to look forward with joyful expectation to its glorious completion. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!