

Gastronomy and Geology

In the name of him who is the Way the Truth and the Life, dear friends in Christ: In the Gospel accounts that tell of the Apostle Peter, he usually comes across as rather impulsive. He tends to speak and act before he thinks. So, it's easy to get the impression that thoughtful eloquence is not his thing. And yet in today's Epistle lesson Peter shows us otherwise. He describes aspects of the Christian life for his readers using two quite clever illustrations: one drawn from the field of gastronomy, having to do with food and appetites; and the other from the field of geology, having to do with rocks and stones. With both he encourages us to grow as individuals in Christian faith and life, and to grow together as members of the same body of Christ. With those goals in mind, then, let's examine what Peter has to say.

He begins, "Just as newborn infants crave their mother's milk, so you also are to crave the pure spiritual milk that will cause you to grow up to salvation." By spiritual milk he means, of course, the properly taught and expounded Word of God by which the Holy Spirit feeds, strengthens, and matures our faith. In the same way that a baby knows what it wants and lets its mother know it with increasingly urgent cries of despair until it's satisfied, Peter would have us pursue growth in our faith through the attentive hearing, reading, studying, and meditating upon the Holy Scriptures. The picture also points to the need for feeding at regular intervals. You can't feed the baby and forget about it for long periods of time. It's going to be hungry again soon; and so it is with our faith.

It's important too that what we eat in this sense is pure because there's a lot of stuff out there that isn't. I recently heard of a study that was done a while back concerning children and what they choose to eat. The woman conducting the study did her research with young children in an institutional setting: orphans or those who had otherwise become wards of the state. She set it up so that at meal times the subjects were given a broad smorgasbord of foods from which to choose. And what she found was that while the children made different choices according to their personal tastes, they all tended to put a reasonably well-balanced variety of foods on their plates so that they ended up with a good mix of proper nutrients. When she published her results, she suggested that there's no need for parents to control or supervise what their children consume. She said that they know instinctively what's good for them and what their bodies need. And for a while, anyway, this became the standard thinking on the subject.

The trouble is that study was seriously flawed on two counts: first, the children who were the subjects of the study had already spent time in an institutional setting. Thus, they were used to taking their meals from an institutional kitchen. There were no choices. If today we're having meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and a bread roll, that's what you got – in predetermined portions, no less. So, the image of what constitutes a well balanced meal had already been impressed upon them. They knew what a complete meal was supposed to look like, so that's what they chose: something that looked like what they were used to.

The second problem was this: the children weren't given what dieticians would consider unhealthy foods from which to choose. They weren't offered candy, sugary breakfast cereals, and other overly fatty, salty, sugary junk foods that children are attracted to. They didn't get to choose between say soup and sandwich for lunch or a big piece of chocolate cake with ice cream. If they had, it's a safe bet that they would have chosen less wisely. As a matter of fact the food industry in this country banks on this. They carefully design their products to tantalize taste buds, not to provide proper nutrition. They want people hooked on what they make so

they can make money. They know that when given a choice, a lot of people, most perhaps, tend not to choose wisely. And the result is the growing American crisis with obesity and all the complications that go with it.

It works the much same way in the world of religion. The best sellers in Christian bookstores, the most popular preachers and teachers on Christian television and radio, the speakers at the biggest conferences and revivals – tend as a whole to be more about scratching itching ears than providing the good stuff; what Peter calls pure spiritual milk. And it isn't always obvious. False teaching can be quite subtle. Nor is it required to carry a content warning label. And one of the most disturbing things that I sometimes hear when offering a critique of a popular book or author is, "Oh, I read that, Pastor. I didn't see a problem with it." Yup. And that's the problem. So, what I'm saying is be sure of your sources. Make sure you're getting the pure stuff. And if you're not sure, ask. Ask someone you know you can trust. Why? Because in the same way that you are what you eat, so also your faith is formed and matures according to what you consume spiritually.

But let's move on from there. Now that Peter has us all nursing contentedly of the pure spiritual milk at the breast of Mother Church, he makes that change from gastronomy to geology. He calls Jesus the living stone, rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious. And then he says, "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

There's a lot to unpack there. Let's start with the temple and what it meant to God's people before the coming of Christ. The temple was for them more than a place to gather for worship and to offer the sacrifices by which God forgave sins. *It was God's house on earth.* They understood that he was actually present in the stone building in the inner sanctuary called the Holy of Holies. Yes, they believed that God is everywhere, but there was a special, gracious, manifestation of God's presence that they could point to and say, "Our God lives with us right in there." In that sense, the temple was unlike any other place on the planet. It was the absolute center of religious life and devotion. To the Jewish mind, you couldn't believe and practice the faith without it. And that had become a huge problem for Jewish Christians. When Peter wrote this epistle, there was a full-scale war going on against believers in Jesus by the very people who still ran the temple. Openly practicing their faith in there now would get them killed. They felt that they were exiled from God and no longer had access to him.

But recall that Jesus called himself – his own body – a temple. And that makes sense: *he was what the temple was:* God's special, gracious, manifestation on earth. You could point to Jesus and say, "Our God lives with us. He's right there in that living, breathing body."

Take it step further now. The people in charge of the stone temple, the priests and religious leaders, rejected Jesus. They condemned him and had him crucified – crucified outside of the city of Jerusalem at a place called Golgotha. It was basically the city dump. It had formerly been a rock quarry. From it had been cut most of the stones that made up the city and its walls. Ah, but when they built the temple, they judged the stone of this quarry to be of inferior quality. They wanted the best stone available for God's house, and that they found at a quarry many miles away. So, Jesus, the living stone, was rejected and killed in a whole quarry of stone the builders had rejected.

But he didn't stay dead. That's what our Easter celebrations are all about. God performed in the temple of Jesus' body the ultimate sacrifice. He carried the sins of the world to the place of rejection and throw away filth, and on the cross, he paid the Law's due penalty

through his suffering and death. And then he rose to show that the sacrifice had been accepted and is complete. No more payment for sin is needed. In that sense, the old temple, the one made of stone from which the Christians were being excluded was now obsolete. The animal sacrifices still being offered there were meaningless.

Besides, God was now in the process of building a new temple – a temple not of hard, cold stone but of living human flesh and blood. Jesus, true God and true man, is the precious cornerstone of this new temple. He's the first stone placed and the one on which all the other stones line up. And we who believe in him, who have been delivered from sin and death through faith in him, are ourselves being joined together as the living stones of God's new temple: the Christian Church.

Peter is at pains to show that this new temple is in every way superior to the one the Jewish Christians had been expelled from. You feel you've lost something here; but no, what we have now is so much better. God used to be behind the stone, separated from you even while he lived among us. The only way to approach him was through sacrifice for sin. And even then, you had to go through the mediation of a priest. You had no direct contact. But now God is actually in us both as individuals through the indwelling of his Spirit, and collectively as he comes to us and makes his presence known whenever and as often as we gather for Word and Sacrament. If you are part of this temple, it's because God chose you. He's honored you, not due to your merit, but because of his grace in Christ. And you no longer need a priest. You are his priesthood. *You* are the human face he presents to the world. And as priests you offer spiritual sacrifices, not for sin; Jesus did that. It's done. Your sacrifices are your praise and thanksgiving to God through Jesus for all he's done for you and for your salvation, and the acts of mercy, forgiveness, and loving service you perform for others – first for other believers, the living stones to which you are joined; and then for those who as yet stand outside this temple, and whom God would very much like to include in it before he brings it to completion.

And it's here that Peter turns his focus toward a different part of his intended audience. Up to this point he's had largely in mind the Jewish Christians who were upset and struggling with this idea of how we can be faithful without access to the old temple. But God was doing something else radically different with his new temple of living stones: he was building it also with Gentiles. Talk about formerly rejected stones. In the old temple, if you weren't a Jew you couldn't come any closer than the outermost court. There were signs announcing the death penalty for any Gentile that passed beyond its inner wall. The message was clear: you are not one of us. You are not one of God's chosen people.

But listen to what Peter tells them now: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; one you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

The old distinctions, the old separations are a thing of the past. In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile. Every living stone the Lord incorporates into his temple is honored with its own place and purpose. The building can't be complete without it. And so we should see one another as the Lord continues to nourish us as his children with the pure spiritual milk, and as he builds us together into his holy temple: the dwelling place of God on earth, for that is what we are in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!