

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF ROCKS

Acts 7. 55-60

1 Peter 2. 2-10

John 14. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

On seven different occasions, our passage from the first letter of St Peter mentions different types of rocks: in this particular text, they are referred to as 'stones', 'cornerstones' and 'rocks'. Have you ever noticed? Stones and rocks appear often in Scripture:

- God is frequently referred to as a rock.
- The patriarchs of the Old Testament set up altars of stones wherever something important happened.
- The Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets.
- Moses struck a rock and water flowed from it.
- Stephen was killed by stoning.
- Simon had his name changed to 'Petra', which means rock.
- And it was a large stone that was found to be rolled away from the tomb on that Resurrection morning.

Our appointed epistle for today speaks of stones as building blocks. At the time that this passage was written, buildings were most often built of stones. A construction site in Palestine would consist of piles and piles of stones to be used for the foundation of a structure, and carefully placed together to build its walls.

The most important building block in the pile was the cornerstone. Today, cornerstones serve a largely ceremonial function and generally provide a place to record historical data related to the building. Sometimes, on the cornerstones of churches, you can see the date the church was founded and the date the church was

built. But in our Lord's time, the cornerstone served a more important function. The cornerstone was actually the one piece upon which the rest of the building was built. If the cornerstone were not set correctly, then the rest of the structure would not be square and would not stand the test of time. The cornerstone determined the character and the stability of the whole house or building.

Our text from 1 Peter contains several images concerning stones. Firstly, we are invited to come to Jesus, a living cornerstone. Though rejected by mortals, he was chosen and precious in God's sight. Then we are admonished to be like living stones ourselves, and to be built into a spiritual house. And we are reminded that Christ is the 'living stone' who has become the cornerstone of the church.

What is meant by this phrase 'a living stone'? After all, a stone by its very nature is an inanimate object, that is, one that does not have life.

Well, if you check your dictionary, a stone is defined as a rock which is used for a specific purpose, such as a building block, a paving block, a grindstone or a gravestone. If it is used for these specific purposes, then we must next ask why it is used for these purposes.

Obviously, a stone is known for its permanence; and for its imperviousness to change or to things like the weather. It is also not easily moved from one place to another, especially if it is a large stone. Once placed in a specific spot, it will stay there unless a greater force is exerted upon it. Now all of these qualities concerning stones can be attributed to persons. The following story helps to illustrate this.

Have you ever heard the expression, 'He's a brick!?' The first-century Greek writer and philosopher Plutarch, in writing about the king of Sparta, tells how that phrase originated. It seems that an ambassador on a diplomatic mission visited the famous

city-state of Sparta. Knowing that Sparta's strength was acclaimed throughout all of Greece, the ambassador expected to see massive fortresses surrounding the city, but he found nothing of the kind. Surprised, the ambassador said to the king, 'Sir, you have no fortifications for defence. How can this be?' 'Oh, but we are well protected,' replied the king. 'Come with me tomorrow and I will show you the walls of Sparta.'

The next day the king led the ambassador to the plains where Sparta's army was assembled in full battle dress. Pointing proudly to his soldiers, who stood fearlessly in place, the king said, 'Behold the walls of Sparta—ten thousand men and every one a brick!'<sup>1</sup> Although this story talks about men being bricks, nothing would change if we referred to them as rocks. In this military analogy, the soldiers are 'rocks' because they will not be moved and will be steadfast in their loyalty to their king. Because of this and other historical examples, being called a 'rock' implies bravery and courage in the face of danger.

'Come to him, a living stone...and like living stones, let yourselves be built up into a spiritual house' our text tells us (2. 4-5). Living stones? Spiritual houses?<sup>2</sup> Peter continues to mix strange metaphors. Then we recall that there is something that can make a house a home ... something can transform the bricks and mortar, the boards and nails of a house into the 'spiritual home' of a family.

There are houses; there are classrooms; there are offices; and there are churches that are interchangeable boxes, which are quickly forgotten as soon as we move on. Then are the homes and rooms and sacred spaces that we never forget; their addresses etched forever in our minds. This is the kind of household that Peter would have us long to become: a congregation of people whose lives at first glance appear to be

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<sup>1</sup> 'He Was a Brick!' From *Sower's Seed of Encouragement, Fifth Planting*, by Brian Cavanaugh (T.O.R. Paulist Press: Mahwah, NJ, 1988), 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Spiritual houses are also temples, and in temples holy priests offer spiritual sacrifices. Spiritual sacrifice is surely a reference to the whole shape of the faithful life, the life of holiness. Cf. 1 Pet 1. 16.

flawed and unworthy; yet on closer inspection, a household whose open doors welcome all who come through them, and who invite everyone to come home to God and to be transformed by him. This type of household is a royal household of 'living stones' that even the oldest and wisest long for.

Someone has said that God is like a great rock-collector who finds us. Once we were 'not a people', as verse 10 of our text puts it. We were nobodies, if you like; but somehow God looked within us and saw potential, and knew that with his help and his enabling, we could grow up and serve him faithfully.

God is not only a rock collector; he is also the great stone-cutter who carves us. Do you remember the story of Michelangelo, who carved his statue of David out of flawed marble? It may seem painful to us to be carved, and in the process, we might lose some 'assets' that we thought to be important. But God's carving is necessary; and the end result will be our spiritual beauty and maturity.

Finally, God is not only a rock collector and a stone-cutter; he is the great stonemason who fits us together. God knows that "Lone Ranger" Christianity is harmful to our spiritual health. That is why he takes us 'independent-minded' Christians and puts us together. He knows that we are all meaningless puzzle pieces until we are snapped into the big picture. 'Come to him, a living stone...and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ'.

A few verses later, Peter echoes the words spoken to Moses at Sinai: 'But you are a chosen race,<sup>3</sup> a royal priesthood,<sup>4</sup> a holy nation,<sup>5</sup> God's own people, in order that you

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Is 43. 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> This claim, based on Exodus 19, is that as God chose Aaron to be a priest for the sake of God's glory, so now all Christian people are called by God and are called to offer sacrifices; not the sacrifice of the altar, but the sacrifice of faithful obedience and the life of love that goes with it. The sacrifice is a life without malice, guile, insincerity, envy or slander.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ex 19. 4-6.

may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;<sup>6</sup> once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy<sup>7</sup>.

That's who we are, living stones built into a spiritual house, so that at St Stephen's we can be a community of grace and peace; a house of prayer for all people; a place of Christian formation and a mission outpost.

And we can be living stones as we come to him, Jesus Christ, who was the stone that the builders rejected but who became the chief cornerstone, the stone that is the headstone of the arch, the foundation stone of our life and of all life.

Dear friends, being part of this spiritual house is not imposed upon us. It is a choice. Let us choose afresh today to be *living stones!*

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hos 2. 23.