

“WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?”

Joshua 4:1-9; 1 Peter 2:4-10

We took a look earlier on in our service this morning at the new National Armed Services Memorial out at Alrewas. It is well worth a visit, if you get a few minutes, for all sorts of reasons, not least the actual building and design of it. Some of you may have seen a documentary about it on television last Sunday, and there were all kinds of facts and figures which I should really have noted down, but at the time I didn't know I was going to talk about it this morning. However, I do recall that there are thousands of tons of Portland stone involved in the whole thing.

And stone has been the material of choice for memorials since the dawn of time. I suppose there wasn't much else in the beginning, but it is also pretty durable (if you get the right stone) and there is a kind of earthy majesty in large stone edifices which somehow connect us to the rest of creation. If you look back through the pages of the Bible, you'll see that men and women have always whacked up something pretty substantial to remind themselves of events which have become freighted with meaning for them. In *Genesis 8:20*, when Noah and his family – the future hope of the human race – step out of the ark on to dry land, Noah raises a stone altar in thanksgiving and remembrance. When Jacob encounters God at Bethel, with his startling dream of the stairway to heaven (aeons before Led Zeppelin ever got there), he gets up early the next morning and puts up a stone pillar as a sign that he has been, as he puts it, “*at the gate of heaven*”.

There are plenty of other examples, too, but we read of just one in those words from the book of *Joshua* a few moments ago: another seminal incident in the history of God's people and, as we look back on it now from our vantage point beyond the New Testament, a seminal incident in the history of God's plan for the salvation of humanity. God's people, as their epic journey from slavery in Egypt to nationhood in the land God had promised them nears its end, cross the River Jordan, the symbolic frontier not just of their land but of their destiny. As they do so, twelve large stones are piled up into a memorial cairn at the point of their crossing, one stone for each of the twelve tribes which make up the nation. They would not have been dressed and carved, as the great slabs of Portland stone at Alrewas, but piled there as a clear indication that something had happened.

And Joshua, leader of God's people, announces that they are there to make people ask questions. Future generations of Israelites will ask, “*What do these stones mean?*” They will see this cairn and wonder what it's all about. There may well be future generations of English people travelling up or down the A38 who will see on the horizon the silhouette of the mound and stones of the National Armed Forces Memorial and they will ask, “What's that all about, then?”, just as we today look at isolated megaliths in fields, or stone circles in the middle of nowhere and ask the same question. And the story (or stories – each name represents a story) can be told again, just as the story of the crossing of the Jordan was and still is explained to countless generations of Jewish people.

The stones in the Jordan were to be a reminder of the activity of God, the one who had made possible their escape from Egypt and who had provided for them a land full of promise. It was sign of his grace and mercy, a lasting memorial to the power of God and its effect on the life of his people. At that place, God had transformed the experience of his people. The stones pointed to him and him alone.

In the reading we heard from his first letter, we find Peter using a similar image. Followers of Jesus Christ, those who have had their experience of life transformed by him, are “*living stones ... being built into a spiritual house.*” You and I are a memorial in the same way that the altar of Noah, the pillar of Jacob, the cairn at the River Jordan, the sweeping arcs of Portland stone at Alrewas are memorials. As one writer puts it: “*God's architecture is biological.*” We are the ones who are supposed to draw from people the question, “*What do these stones mean?*” We often think of the cross as the continuing memorial to God's transforming power. Many see the communion service as a memorial, too. And both are, indeed, symbolic reminders of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. But the reminder of what

God has done in this world is made visible to most of the people with whom we come into contact day by day in us – the “*living stones*” of the Church.

We are people whose lives have been transformed by our encounter with Jesus, by the presence of his Holy Spirit within us. For some of us that transformation has been dramatic and unmistakable – a life that was heading nowhere, a life of obvious immorality, a life without hope, has been spectacularly changed into a life of hope and holiness in a way which no-one can ignore. For many of us the transformation has been less dramatic, but no less real – and, we would hope, no less obvious.

Peter reminds us in v9 of what we have become, of why we should be prompting the question “*What do these stones mean?*” We are “*a chosen people*”. God has chosen us – it’s nothing to do with us, really. All we need to do initially is respond to God’s gracious invitation to accept his love and the offer of a new start in life. In his infinite grace, God has looked upon us and picked us out as people who need his help. And that should not tempt us to arrogance – “Look at me. God’s picked me.” – because God has made it possible for everyone to be chosen. The offer is made to all men and women. It’s just that there are very many who refuse the offer, who choose to go their own way. Peter talks of us as being “*chosen*” to remind us that it’s not of our doing – it’s God’s initiative.

But once we have responded, God begins to mould us into “*a royal priesthood*”. We become those whose one focus in life is to bring glory to him. All our life becomes a means of worshipping him. In our daily work, in our leisure, in our time together, in our time alone, in our words and attitudes and actions – in every part of our lives – we are worshipping him, bringing glory to his holy name, directing our gaze and the sometimes baffled gaze of others towards the God who has done so much for us.

That happens as we live our own personal lives, but we are also drawn together in that enterprise as “*a holy nation*”. Transcending national and international barriers, God’s people are a nation set apart. “Holy” is a word which speaks of purity and distinctiveness. “Nation” speaks of people with a shared identity. And that’s what we are. To some extent you can tell on a human level those people who are part of a particular nation by their national dress, their physical appearance, their language, their shared ideals. It’s not foolproof, of course – especially not in a world of blurred boundaries and cosmopolitan communities – but there are certain things that we can go on. So it is with God’s people. There should be something about a Christian from Lichfield and a Christian from Brazil and a Christian from China that speaks of a shared set of beliefs, a common set of values, a distinctive focus on Jesus Christ.

In the next phrase Peter homes in on that. We are “*a people belonging to God*”. God has set his mark on us, the mark of integrity, the mark of joy, the mark of love. Peter tells us in the next verse, in words reminiscent of the wonderful story of Hosea in the Old Testament, that “*once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God*”. There was a time when we all melted into the background, there was nothing about us that was distinctive, we were all going our own way, doing our own thing. But God has called us together and, even in a small group of us such as are here this morning, he has managed to mould a pretty disparate bunch of people into a church. We belong to God. We are followers of Christ. We are something that should stand out in our community, in our world, so that people say, in effect, “*What do these stones mean? What’s all this about? Who are these people?*” We are, like the stone memorials of which have already spoken, prompts that are designed to remind others of God’s activity.

That’s what Peter means when he writes here, “*that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” Sorry about this: we need a brief detour into the Greek again this week, but I hope you’ll understand why. The word translated here by the NIV as “*declare the praises*” is one of those words that causes translators a bit of difficulty, which is why it ends up being translated differently in different versions. The Greek word is *exangelo*. It’s actually the only time that word appears in the New Testament, which means there’s nothing to compare it with. So the translators have to look at other Ancient Greek writers to see how they used the word – and it’s pretty rare in all Greek literature, actually.

At the root of it is the word *angelo*, which gives us our word “angel” and is part of the word “evangelism”, so clearly this is something to do with “the message”. But it’s not *evangelo*, but *exangelo*; it’s something else to do with proclaiming the message. Interestingly, in some of the ancient writers (Homer, for example), the word is used to convey something of the idea of gossiping, sharing secrets, that kind of thing. Now there’s something that many people in churches are good at! But here it’s obviously not gossip about each other, it’s gossip about the gospel – it’s sharing stuff about God that we just can’t wait to tell other people. It’s a bit like the cartoon character who says, “*Of course, I wouldn’t say anything about her unless I could say something good. And, oh boy, is this good ...!*”

Oh boy, is **this** good! God has changed us, transformed us! His activity should be obvious in us, and we draw attention to that our gossiping about it. We share the secret of the amazing love of God and sacrifice of Jesus. Paul, in his letters, often calls it “*proclaiming the mystery*” – it is, as the gospel song puts it, “*An open secret*”. The trouble is, though, for most Christians any talk of proclaiming Jesus or telling other people is an immediate turn-off. Some of you probably shut down your systems when you heard the word evangelism a few moments ago. But this isn’t about evangelism – at least, not in the way we normally think about it. This is about being “*living stones*”, being the kind of people that make other people say, in effect, “*What do these stones mean? What’s going on here, then?*”

And how do we do that? Well, by **being** the people God has called us to be, really: living out those things that Peter tells us are characteristic of the followers of Jesus Christ. We are called to live as “*a chosen people*”. Remember, we said that it was all about God choosing us, not the other way round. So that should give us a sense of security – this is God’s doing so we don’t need to strive all the time to get into his good books: we’re there already. Of course, we need to ensure that we have put the past behind us – “repented” as the Bible calls it – that we are done with our old, selfish way of life. But because it is God’s doing, it’s God’s initiative, we can experience a sense of peace, of joy, of serenity which should mean that we don’t get as anxious and as panicky as many people do. Our lives – and our eternal destiny – are safe in God’s hands. That should show in our daily lives.

We live as “*a royal priesthood*”, praising God and worshipping him by our lives. We acknowledge that all we have and all that we are is due to him, and we give him thanks. We live in a way that is focussed on Jesus: he is at the centre of all that we do. Of course, we take time to worship together on a Sunday. We take time day by day to worship God personally as we pray and encounter him through his word, the Bible. But every part of our lives should be lived in such a way that God is glorified by our words and our actions, springing from transformed attitudes.

Most people will see us on a daily basis as individuals, but as “*a holy nation*”, there should be a sense of shared identity, too. Other people should be able to identify us, not as oddballs and weirdoes who do our own thing in a highly individualistic way, but as those who share a common set of values with other Christians they may have come across. We find our identity in Christ, as part of his body (to change the metaphor from that of stones) and we live that out day by day where God has called us to be. The priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem *As kingfishers catch fire* wrote:

*"for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
to the Father through the features of men's faces."*

And, of course, we are “*a people belonging to God*”. Not only do we have that shared identity as a “*holy nation*”, but we recognise and live out the truth that we are his people, doing **his** will, reflecting **his** love. As Jesus told his first disciples, it is love that should mark us off as his people – love for one another and love for those beyond the circle of the Church.

Now there are some high ideals there for us to live up to. But we have the help of God’s Holy Spirit to enable us to do that. And, after all, what we are doing is living out what we actually are. God has formed us into these people, into **this** people. We need to recognise that and become what we actually are. As we do that, little by little others will begin to see our distinctiveness and start to wonder. They may not

use the phrase, they may not even understand the reference, but they will be saying, as the people who looked at Joshua's cairn said, as the generations who will visit the Armed Forces Memorial will say, "*What do these stones mean?*" Well, these stones – you and I – mean that God is at work.

Discussion questions on the next page.

"WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?"
Joshua 4:1-9; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Stone has been the material of choice for memorials since the dawn of time. In *Genesis 8:20*, when Noah steps out of the ark on to dry land, he raises a stone altar in thanksgiving and remembrance. When Jacob encounters God at Bethel (*Genesis 28:16ff*) he puts up a stone pillar as a sign that he has been, as he puts it, "*at the gate of heaven*". When God's people cross the River Jordan (*Joshua 4*), twelve large stones are piled up into a memorial. Joshua announces that they are there to make people ask the questions, "*What do these stones mean?*" The stones were to be a reminder of the activity of God, a sign of his grace and mercy.

Peter uses a similar image in his letter. Followers of Jesus Christ, those who have had their experience of life transformed by him, are "*living stones ... being built into a spiritual house.*" ("*God's architecture is biological.*") We are the ones who are supposed to draw from people the question, "*What do these stones mean?*"

- Peter reminds us in *v9* that we are "***a chosen people***". God has chosen us: it's his initiative.
- God begins to mould us into "***a royal priesthood***". We become those whose one focus in life is to bring glory to him. All our life becomes a means of worshipping him.
- We are also drawn together as "***a holy nation***". Transcending national and international barriers, God's people are a nation set apart. "Holy" is a word which speaks of purity and distinctiveness. "Nation" speaks of people with a shared identity.
- We are "***a people belonging to God***". God has set his mark on us, the mark of integrity, the mark of joy, the mark of love. "*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God*". Even in a small group of us can be moulded into a church.

It is so "*that you may **declare the praises** of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" The Greek word is *exangelo* and in some of the ancient writers (Homer, for example), the word is used to convey something of the idea of gossiping, sharing secrets – this is gossip about the gospel, sharing stuff about God that we just can't wait to tell other people. This is about being "*living stones*", being the kind of people that make other people say, in effect, "*What do these stones mean?*"

How do we do that? By **being** the people God has called us to be, really: living out those things that Peter tells us are characteristic of the followers of Jesus Christ: "***a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God***". Not only do we have that shared identity as a "*holy nation*", but we recognise and live out the truth that we are his people, doing **his** will, reflecting **his** love. As Jesus told his first disciples, it is love that should mark us off as his people – love for one another and love for those beyond the circle of the Church.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do we need memorials? In what ways do you find them helpful?
2. What is the main symbol (or memorial) of Christianity, in your opinion? Why?
3. What are the things (beliefs, attitudes, behaviour) which Christians share which are uniquely distinctive?
4. How can we "gossip the gospel"?
5. If people do ask "what's it all about?", how should we reply? (Look at *1 Peter 3:15*)
6. What will you do in response to this passage?