

Easter 5 Sunday 10 May 2020

Readings: Acts 7:55-60; 1 Pet.2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Reflection

I'm the sort of person who can't visit a beach or river without collecting treasures. My family used to groan as I approached the car boot with arms full of driftwood, rocks, shells or stones at the end of a day's outing. One of my favourite destinations was (and still is) Birdling's Flat – that wild, windswept, shelving beach on the south side of Banks Peninsula – part of the shingle spit enclosing Lake Ellesmere (Te Waihora) and piling against the basalt cliffs of the Peninsula.

The large variety of coloured gem stones found there, are swept up by the northern travelling ocean currents from the rivers in mid- and south Canterbury and beyond. But collecting stones at Birdling's Flat is not for the faint-hearted, and turning your back on the pounding waves is ill-advised. One visitor describes it like this: *The dangers arrive regularly, scything across the beach in the form of breaking waves that are deep, cold, and suck back like a vacuum cleaner on steroids!* But enough of the waves and back to the stones. Perhaps you too, have gathered stones from that wild stretch of Canterbury beach. Perhaps you dream of breaking out of your bubble and heading there again when some sort of 'normality' returns!

Two of today's readings mention stones. In our first reading from Acts, we hear again the story of the stoning of Stephen. We recall that Stephen was one of the seven men appointed to care for the immigrant, Hellenist widows in the early Jerusalem church – a man described as full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of grace and power, and doing great wonders and signs among the people. But there were some in the Greek-speaking *synagogue* who were threatened by Stephen's passion and vigorous debate. Their response was to set up false witnesses who accused Stephen of blasphemy and false teaching.

Somehow this reminds me of recent attacks on our own nation's leaders and their well-informed responses to Covid-19. How sad that we've had to endure 'oppositional politicking' rather than collaboration and grace during this time of pandemic. I wonder when we will evolve beyond tolerating such primitive styles of communication?

Stephen, when confronted by the high priest in the presence of the synagogue council of elders, makes a grand speech telling the Big Story of God's covenant with the Hebrew people (you can read it in Acts chapter seven).

Stephen concludes his speech with a scathing attack, not only on the synagogue elders but the whole Jewish nation, for its disobedience to God. He certainly wasn't aiming for a high score in the popularity stakes!

We read that '*when they heard these things they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.*'

If they'd stopped at a bit of teeth-grinding it wouldn't have been so bad, but what comes next is their angry response to Stephen's Spirit-filled witness. Dragging him out of the city, the people begin to stone him. Stephen – following the pattern of the passion of Jesus – becomes the first Christian martyr. And *we* are introduced to a young Saul – at the time, a zealous persecutor of the early Church. I wonder, did he too, have a stone in his hand that day?

In contrast with our first reading, the first letter of Peter speaks words of guidance, encouragement and affirmation. Instead of stones of death, the epistle writer describes The *Living Stone* – the one rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight. This precious stone is first described in Isaiah, and in Psalm 118. The 'Living Stone' seems something of an oxymoron. But from Genesis onwards, stones have played an important part in the development of God's people. Jacob rested his head on a stone pillow as he dreamed of a ladder to the heavens and on waking, built an altar, naming the place Bethel (which means house of God).



My own mind recalls the stone cairns created by many travellers on grass verges in the Mackenzie Country. More recently, I've enjoyed creating my own in the beautiful Golden Bay region.

The house of God described in 1 Peter is a *spiritual* house built of *living* stones, with Christ as the cornerstone. Instead of a nation damned for historic disobedience, there is now a *Chosen* People. These Living Stones are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.' Peter's letter is to the exiles of the

dispersion – the early Gentile church. These living stones – this spiritual house includes you and me.

Instead of a single nation, we are all God's chosen people. Instead of a high priest having sole access to God, we – through Jesus the Christ – all personally encounter the living God. The sacrifice we offer as a royal priesthood, through our baptism, is ourselves – every part of our lives, a fragrant offering lived to the glory of God. This sacrifice is no burden, but a privilege and a joy. The Latin word for priest is pontifex which means bridge-builder. As a royal priesthood we are called to bring the love of God to others. As our scripture says: '*You are chosen... in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*'

Each one of us, as a living stone, brings every part of ourselves and our lives, all our gifts, blemishes and talents (those known and those yet to be discovered) to be built into God's spiritual house with Christ – the rejected One - as our foundation and cornerstone.

My own ever-growing collection of stones is diverse – stones compressed, heated, frozen, tossed, tumbled spewed from the depths of the earth; each unique, yet belonging to the greater whole; each one, part of a story told over millennia.

Perhaps you have a special stone – something precious and beautiful. I invite you to reflect on *your* precious and beautiful part in God's story. Perhaps you have clenched or hurled proverbial stones in anger, righteousness, resentment or fear. Perhaps you've felt compressed, heated, frozen, tossed, tumbled or discarded – especially through our Covid-19 challenging times. You are held in the palm of God's hand. You are a living stone, being built into a spiritual house, chosen, called, beloved.

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