

Living Stones

(Posted 17th Jan 2021)

"Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house..." 1 Pet 2:4-5



(image of a plants known as 'Living Stones, 'Living Pebbles or Lithops)

"Living Stones"! Why would Peter describe Jesus and his followers as 'living stones'? When you try to think of a living stone, do you find it possible to conjure up an image? A stone moving, living and breathing is would be an odd sight, right? The metaphor is a term is an 'oxymoron'

bringing together words that contradict each other, referring to material used for a building but alive - impossible within our frame of reference. However, what this could mean for us as believers?

It is thought that Peter had in mind the Temple of Jerusalem when directing his readers to consider themselves to be liken themselves, the Church as the Temple of God. To do so would make for Believers to imagine themselves replacing stones/bricks which when placed together make up a structure that will house the Spirit of God. The people of God, referred to as 'Living stones' as God's Temple. Further consideration of this imagery calls for readers to hold two ideas together; firstly, a 'living stone' as an individual, "you are temples of the living God" "you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you" (1 Corinthians 3:16) and secondly, as a community of living stones, "growing into a holy temple in the Lord in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." (Ephesians 2: 20-22) Therefore, whether together or apart we are God's Temple; His Church. Which will in practice mean that we are divinely resourced whether we are community or apart. When we alone, apart from the community of Believers, we are by default in community with the Father, Son and through the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and within us. "The Spirit of truth...you know Him for He dwells with you and will be in you." And Jesus' promise "I am in My Father, and you in Me and I in you." (John 14: 17-20). The church is to understand itself as the Temple of God and as we quickly refer back to our Christmas Readings - the Church can understand itself as Immanuel in the earth.

More on why stones? As Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey the people hailed his as King, calling out in out in worship with shouts of praise as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. The pharisees complained and called out to Jesus to silence his disciples. Jesus replied ' "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out..." Jesus as the Creator, the One in whom, "all things were made...and without Him nothing was made. In Him was life..." John 1:3-4". We can refer to scripture, with confidence see and know that Jesus as the author of life can animate and bring life to dead, all non-living things. Like stones we as unbelievers were once considered dead, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins... (were) made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions Ephesians 2: 1,5. To be referred to as stones; living stones, first we see, the impossible aspect of Peter's image as stones naturally lacking life before seeing that the stones can be alive in Christ ... the dead appearance of the stone refers to our lives before Christ and our new state as 'living stones' speaks of our lives brought to life in Him.

The current Pandemic has thrown a great challenge to the Church at large which has required adaptation and new ways of functioning and being Church added challenges arise when as a pastorate, a church is without a Leader. Such circumstances raise the question of how are we functioning as a church outside of our building? Many churches have risen to the challenge and have made great strides corporately but for those who are still finding their way and for individuals who are finding it difficult to adapt it is good for us to remember that this is not new. Israel lived through a similar experience when in captivity and exile, found themselves scattered as a nation and separated from their main place of worship – the Temple in Jerusalem. The nation of Israel still had to find a way to worship and serve God in their respective places. We think for instance the challenges faced by Daniel,

Esther and the influences of prophet Jeremiah whose words to Israel, challenged them to consider religion being a matter of the heart rather than that of rituals being routinely carried out within building as a necessary means to maintaining worship of God. Circumstances enforce change but the fact remains that God never changes, He will remain present for His people ensuring that 'all things work together for the good...according to His purpose'.

The restrictions imposed during this pandemic has put many believers outside of their churches, their places of worship. Many are distressed even offended that churches have been closed. Offended? I find such offence strange, as this speaks more to the reliance of being gathered in a building. According to the scriptures and our considerations so far, whether we are gathered in or outside of a building our definition of being church doesn't change. Yes, the church is a gathered people or community of God, but it is also a community built up of 'living stones' – the church is both corporate and individual all at the same time. So, when we cannot gather, we maintain the status of being a 'temple of the living God' a house or vessel of His Holy Spirit. It is our relationship, our association and continual connection with the 'Chief Cornerstone'; Jesus who as the cornerstone aligns us, enlivens us, sustains our growth as human individual/s to form a Temple worthy to worship and serve Him. Through this relationship we also develop our resilience, ability and confidence to survive the challenges we face in challenging times. It is our human bodies rather than a motionless brick building that forms His Temple, bodies who make for a more fluid, flexible structure with the ability to change, grow and adapt in spite of external circumstances remaining open and welcoming new believers at every stage of its development.

As 'living stones' we understand ourselves as divinely resourced rather than looking only to external support of other living stones, we are to turn inwards and look for God within to seek within from Him; His Holy Spirit whatever we believe we need.

As 'living stones' we can lean into our spiritual makeup, our spiritual inheritance, our spiritual gifts that can be used to aid and support other 'living stones' who are alone, our neighbours and our communities. "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶ Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them...*" (Romans 12:4-)

As 'living stones' whether together or apart we can as Paul suggests take on the responsibility of looking after each other pastorally through whatever means are available to us. A pastoral heart seeks to "Love from the centre of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fuelled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality." (Romans 12: 9-13)

As 'living stones' we are church wherever we find ourselves together or apart we are Church enlivened in Christ by His Holy Spirit. We entrust ourselves to the 'Great Shepherd and Overseer of our souls' who we believe cares for us and as we place all our cares and concerns to Him, we do so in the knowledge that "the God of all loving grace, who has called you to share in his eternal glory in Christ, will personally and powerfully restore you and make you stronger than ever. Yes, he will set you firmly in place and build you up. And he has all the power needed to do this—forever! Amen. (1 Pet 5:10)

Father, in the name of Jesus – May we, as your 'living stones' continue to thrive as we depend on You. May we find our way to live confidently as Your Temple though these challenging and difficult times ... **Amen**

How Great Thou Art
Jesus be the Centre

<https://youtu.be/mHqgQjJrxl8>
<https://youtu.be/EG-11kK-BpU>

You are my friends...

(Posted 10th Jan 2021)



"You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you..." John 15:15-16

In a recent Christmas Sermon entitled 'We need a Saviour, as I addressed our current global issues, I emphasised how God down through the centuries promised to send to the World a Saviour, of such greatness, power and magnitude who would rescue and meet the needs of those who are suffering. Centuries of promise were fulfilled when an Angel appeared to shepherds and delivered the good news, ***'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'*** Luke 2:8 The birth of a Saviour 'today' on Christmas Day became Jesus, the Saviour for 'today' at all times. During His time on earth Jesus spent a great deal of time teaching, healing and revealing much about Himself, the Father and the reality of Kingdom of God's presence with us in the World, all for our future reference. And today as we look again at the continued risk of this Global Pandemic, I share for consideration our need of a 'Friend. In John's Gospel we find in one the many conversation between Jesus and His disciples, Jesus speaking of a shift in the relationship between them. In just a few words, Jesus discloses that any power dynamic of 'the greater and the lesser' is removed and replaced with an understanding of friendship as the new measure of their relationship. Jesus knew that as the time for his crucifixion and death was drawing near, His disciples would need a greater level of intimacy and closeness; more than that of a Leader and Teacher, they would need a trusted 'Friend'.

I call you friends; the use of 'friends' here identifies the shift not only in that of the relationship for the disciples but also in their thinking about themselves. Jesus' use of the term recognises His disciples affectionately as 'favoured and beloved.' Among Jesus' many names, titles and ranks, revealed about Jesus in the Scriptures, here He opens the way to be known as 'friend'. This He does, by first acknowledging His disciples as friends, which would be the ongoing legacy for all who would go on to believe in Him. The power in this simple phrasing is that Jesus maintains His sovereignty and status without the haughty ego that distances, He seeks to come near, to close the distance and remove any sense or belief in any 'unapproachability' to be found in their thoughts of Him as Messiah and Saviour. He does so, by calling the disciples, friends, this is to be their experience of him from that moment on. Just as Jesus shares everything with them, they are to understand their relationship as one of reciprocity, understanding that He is equally interested in them sharing their lives with him too.

Jesus calls you and I friends, His words to his disciple's repeats in some way the relationship God chose to have with Abraham under the same designation of friend in Genesis 15, ***"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. [James 2:23]*** Jesus' message is clear, if we believe, He will be the Person through which God's desire for a close and personal relationship with humanity will happen. God as divine, holds Sovereignty might and power, a status which requires reverence and worship but not distance. Jesus offers humanity a friendship that can be counted on at any time and in any situation. Yes, in times of great stress and difficulty he would want for us to trust Him with our greatest concerns, our secrets and our fears so that He can offer relief, support, deliverance and more besides, He wishes to share more about Himself, the wisdom and the power of the Kingdom of God and truths about God the Father for our greater assistance.

Following another Government announcement, we as a nation have entered another national Lockdown 3. A new variant of Covid 19 poses greater risks of transmission, and hospitals are now at breaking point calling now for further tighter restrictions. People are weary, afraid and greatly concerned with good reason, after almost a year the threat to life has not shifted but has intensified. In addition to the virus is the impact of Lockdown on every aspect of life for all ages. What do we do with all this fear and concern? Who do we turn to for security and a sense of peace and calm? Yes, we often turn to our loved ones, supportive friends and whilst we are all facing these issues together, we know that everyone

is trying to find a way to cope and adapt to the circumstances around us. We are in need of that strong, faithful objective friend. By definition a friend is **'a person you know well and like a lot, but who is usually not a member of your family.'** And a **'best friend' is one who 'you value above other friends in your life, someone you have fun with, someone you trust and someone in whom you are confident...'** one who keeps your secrets and the person who you turn to in times of trouble. We have a powerful friend in Jesus especially in times when good friends are needed and are in short supply. Today, we are personally reminded, "you've got a friend", an unseen friend who makes His presence known through experience. He is One upon whom we can rely, upon whom you can call, receive companionship, comfort and support. As a friend He is faithful and loyal having no hidden agenda other than concern for your well-being.

Below I share with you the Lyrics and Youtube link of the song 'My Friend'. I was introduced to this song in the 70's when as a teenager I was part of our School's yearly Christmas choir. We sung each year at a special service held in an Anglican Church in our local borough. This song has special meaning for me; not only can I say that as a Choir we sung it very well, (almost angelic) the words have also remained with me all these years. Having searched for it online for many years without much luck, I was glad when I was finally found it and became reacquainted with it. I share with you below a YouTube link, a version of the song sung by Eddie Fischer. It sounds to me like an old Hollywood orchestral rendition, 1954. It is a cover of the song which elaborately elevates the words to the majesty it is so deserving of. According to your taste in music you may find recordings by Mahalia Jackson, Vera Lynn and Frankie Laine

My Friend – Eddie Fisher

<https://youtu.be/lc-C7t4HJIs>

My Friend is the King of all Kings
And yet my friend
Walks beside me My Friend
Rules the earth and the sun
And yet my friend stops to guide me

My friend takes my hand
Just when all appears in vain
And makes it plain
Through joy or pain
He'll remain
My friend

My friend tells me life is a road
And though it ends
At the bending
My friend
Tells then there's a road beyond this road
That is unending

Some day when I walk up the happy road that lies
Around the bend
Who will there be
To welcome me
My friend

Some day when I walk up the happy road that lies
Around the bend
Who will be there
To welcome me
My friend

Dear Father...For every person in need of a friend today, may it be granted to them according to your desire expressed in the words of Jesus. May their experiences of your comfort, heal, inspire and bring peace. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen

I am a Friend of God - Israel Houghton

<https://youtu.be/UI0cgUKMqRs>

New Year New Year's Resolution (Posted 1st Jan 2021)

"...Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely, I have a delightful inheritance I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. **I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken...**" Psalm 16: 5-8

By the time you have seen this post today ... we will have already celebrated the New Year. It is 2021! Yippee! Did you make any New Year's Resolutions this year? What became of the ones you made as 2020 entered in?

For many, we have left a year that has been unlike any other year experienced before. Yet, there is something about the start of a new year which makes it seem to be the perfect time to as the saying goes 'turn over a 'new leaf'; make a fresh start. It's that sense of renewed hope, the thought of a new beginning a chance to do over and make right things that did not go so well the previous year. And here we are again at a new beginning with so much unknown ahead of us. Despite the many plans and promises that had to be abandoned or postponed it would not be considered silly to attempt to hope for a different outcome than that of what we are currently facing. The Psalm for today provides for us a great example of godly resolutions and what it means to live and experience God's promise of 'Immanuel'; God with us – a reality that we were reminded of a reality that we considered over the Christmas period.

The Psalmist David opens prayerfully asking God to keep him safe believing wholeheartedly that God is for him a trusted 'safe place' and a source of goodness. David shares observations about those around him who have chosen to put their faith in other gods, in other religious and non-religious ideals but he makes an open declaration in prayer that he will not do likewise nor will he follow others in their pursuit of idolatrous worship. David makes a resolution about his stand with God, it is a position with God that provides him with a perspective that will determine the outcome of all other resolutions, plans and promises he will make. Here, David presents for us an example of how our resolutions can have longevity and success with godly support and empowerment – he leads us to a place from which we too can say "I will not be shaken."

David resolves to choose Yahweh (GOD) as his only means of dependence; the only one in whom he will put his confidence. It is by this choice that David experiences Yahweh support, counsel, guidance and wisdom that he needs to journey through life. It is clear that there are many paths open to him but in choosing Yahweh David places himself to be instructed and guided by Yahweh as to the right path to take and the right decisions that he should make. In this knowledge David separates himself from the crowd and chooses to make Yahweh the One in whom he will make his focus and destination. David shifts his eyes from the circumstances around him and chooses to seek Yahweh and to see life from His perspective "I will keep my eyes always on the LORD..."

David is single-minded about his choice. There is something about being single-minded, it is that resolute conviction that you have about your decision; the stand you have taken and the confidence you now hold in affirming it as your truth; such resolution acts very much like the setting of a compass, giving direction and the setting of order for how decisions will be made, and actions taken in light of what is resolved and affirmed. It is the activation of the will that acts to engage our motivation and enthusiasm, and that which also acts to strengthen and empower us to keep going and to persevere in times when we would want to give up.

Though it is David's initial step, he knows that exercising his will in this regard will open for him something beyond his current experience and here we share what David is given to see...he now sees with the eyes of faith, another reality - that of the unseen God. God is with him, standing with him at his right hand. David has divine support in the presence of God. The 'right hand' in scripture is symbolic not only of that which is morally upright and good but also that of divine authority and power, strength, and blessing. With all that David sees and understands he affirms with utter confidence and assurance that 'he will never be shaken'; echoing Romans 8:31, "...If God is for us who can be against us?" David is assured that he will stay on course, though he may be battling issues, he will not be defeated. Affirming his position with God, David can live with the distressing realities around him yet hold the conviction that what he sees around him will not defeat him nor determine his end result, nor his future or destiny. He lives in the knowledge that there is another reality at play that will reveal itself in due course. This is the power of David's resolution and the power of faith during trying times.

We know that the New Year Resolutions we often make, start us off at the beginning of the year with hope, energy and motivation. We also know that our resolutions have a tendency to be evaporate or even be forgotten after only a few months of our making them. This is especially so, when we are tested by new circumstances that challenge our belief about our new focus. Our affirmations become more effective when they are made part of our routine; they can be written down for example, in a prayer journal, or on 'post it notes' and repeated in prayer. David shows us that by making God his focus, he is brought into a relationship of empowerment and support and it is within this relationship David secures the opportunity to grow and be strengthened, it is here where we like David can acknowledge and confess challenges presented by our old beliefs and old patterns of behaviour that seek to overthrow the new position we want to take. David understood that with God at His right hand, he will be empowered to defeat everything that stands in his way of achieving that which God has enabled him to embrace in moments of prayerful clarity.

Dear Father

Help us to be more like David, help us to see from his example that by making you our first priority above all other thoughts and ideals we are elevated into an empowering relationship with you. Help us to make our declaration of faith strong and forthright so as to pursue you with single-minded purpose. Reveal also to us how fully present you are with us, so close – you are at our right hand. You are God with us, ready and willing to the strengthen and the support us so that we can say with confidence 'we will not be shaken'. We will stay the course and enter the future you have designed for us. Amen

Because He lives

<https://youtu.be/4M-zwE33zHA>



SUNDAY 20 DECEMBER HONOR OAK BAPTIST CHURCH



CAROLS ON THE STEPS 2020

Carols:

No. 11, Joy to the world

No. 1, O Little Town of Bethlehem

No. 13, Silent Night

No. 18, Angels from the Realm of Glory

No 15, The First Nowell

No. 12, O Come All Thee Faithful

Close - We Wish You A Merry Christmas

Readings:

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Matthew 2:6 ⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’

Luke 2:4-7 ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Isaiah 9:2 ² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

Luke 2:8-14 ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Luke 2:15-20 ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Isaiah 9:6-7 ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

John 1:10-14 ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

