

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021**

**1 Peter 2:4-10 (Belong)**

**Talk by Jonathan Poole, Prayers by Julian Providence**

Hello and welcome to St John's online reflection this week. I hope you've had a fantastic week. My name is Jonathan and it's a pleasure to be with you today. We are going to carry on looking at the message of Peter and the message he has for the early church and in particular thinking of that theme of community and being together.

Before we do that Julian is going to lead us in our prayers.

### **Prayers**

"The Lord is my light salvation. Whom shall I fear. The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid." (Psalm 27:1)

Lord God our stronghold, we thank you for all your faithfulness to us as we emerge from lockdown and are finally able to start meeting in person again.

Lord we think of how you have sustained us while separated as a church for many months and have continued to meet, worship, listen to your Word and have continued to find ways of serving you through CAP, food bank, Amaze Penge, Alpha and the Bible Course and all our midweek gatherings.

Thank you for answered prayer and for all the requests we have brought before you Lord. Thank you our loving Father that you still long to hear your children's voice and that through prayer you are still at work in us, changing us in seen and unseen ways. Give us the faith and encouragement to continue lifting up St John's, our wider family and community and the world to you. Help us to see where your Spirit is still at work and encourage and strengthen us to persist in prayer knowing that as we pray in your will you will always act.

Lord you have also sustained us without a church leader for so many months. Help us to be encouraged by this and not to forget all you've taught us through this time.

Thank you that the new life of St John's with Holy Trinity has now begun. We do pray your hand will be over both our churches as we become one. Holy Spirit will you be strong to guide us through each stage of building your new church in Penge, knowing that not only is this a joyful and exciting change but also uncertain with complexities and things as yet unknown to us. But we know Lord this is your will so help us to trust that you will accomplish your plan for our church. We also trust that you will send the right person to us when the person you have chosen is ready. But for now strengthen us to continue to pray and believe you for this.

We lift our church family to you.

We continue praying for Will. Lord if he is able would you let him know of your love and presence with him and also for his wife Kath and son Sam. Uphold them by your Spirit we pray.

We thank you for Val's improved mobility. We pray for your continued strengthening.

We pray for Gerresse. Please continue to heal him after his surgery.

We pray the same for Andy. Please be with him in hospital. Comfort him and speed his recovery so that he can be discharged home very soon.

Thank you Lord that you see and know and are close to are close to all of us who are in need. Let's take a moment to bring to Jesus someone we know who is in need or to bring him our own concerns or even thanks...

We continue to pray for CAP. Be with Lin, Rachel and Gareth giving them strength, wisdom and compassion as they care for those who are in despair and who have lost all hope. Bring your healing and restoration to their lives and lead them to life and freedom in you. We remember those in the May prayer requests. Thank you for answering prayers for volunteers to come. Please bring them more and enable a strong team to begin to grow.

We pray your blessing on Amaze Penge and on Cherry. Continue to build this ministry and strengthen relationships between all those who come for support.

It was good to see so many children returning to church at Holy Trinity last Sunday for messy church. Thank you for Sue and the team that brought it all together so beautifully and for all that the children learnt about you. We pray for children and young people in our church and in the church in our nation. Lord it is harder these days, especially for younger people to follow you against indifference and active dismissal of faith in you. Help us as a church St John's and Holy Trinity whether parents or not to love and value and nurture our younger people, especially as we return to meeting in person, that they will feel part of a family and be able to take an authentic experience and knowledge of your love into this world.

We remember the vision at St John's that you gave us - to make 'St John's a home for everyone'. It still sounds so beautiful and exciting Lord. Even as we merge with Holy Trinity please continue to make us into that sort of church - a community of people who love you and love one another - your kingdom on Earth and a beacon of light in Penge that people will be drawn to.

We lift our world to you.

We thank you for our democracy and the privilege of living in a country with free, fair and ordered elections. We pray for our nation to be governed with fairness and justice and that an attitude of morality, truth and service will be forces in our Parliament.

We pray for your continued guidance through easing of lockdown. May we not take for granted the freedom we have been given.

And as we enjoy our release from lockdown we remember the pandemic is far from over across the world, in particular remembering India and Nepal, Brazil and Mexico and all

poorer nations trying to control coronavirus and provide healthcare. Again we pray vaccines will be shared and please in your mercy limit the devastation in those countries.

We pray for the conflict between Israel and Gaza. Father we see the evil that arises when people take religion and distort it for their own ends. Lord we don't know if this conflict will ever be over or how it will end but we still pray for peace. We ask Holy Spirit you would restrain the conflict, take the poison out of the rhetoric and protect those caught in the crossfire of rockets and guns. Help leaders of the nations, particularly the US after the failure of the last administration find a better way of peace between Israel and Palestine.

We pray again for the many conflict zones around the world - for Yemen and Syria, Myanmar and Ethiopia and other places on the African continent. Bring peace we pray.

Finally we pray for the Church of England with the publication last month it's report on racism in your church 'From Lament to Action'. Thank you that your church wants to address this. Though it is always painful to address our shortcomings, your word promises we will reap righteousness and peace where we allow you to teach us Lord. Please give wisdom to Archbishop Justin Welby and other leaders as they think about how to implement its recommendations. We pray for our PCC next week as they begin to look at how the recommendations can be lived out in our own church. Give them guidance and wisdom in this also Lord. We thank you that St John's has sought to celebrate the many people you brought into our family. Come Holy Spirit and help us to treasure and celebrate this precious gift you have given us. Remove from among us fear and prejudice in all its forms and open our hearts and minds to see your vision of St John's - one people holy and dearly loved by you.

A Church of England prayer of unity...

Heavenly Father,  
you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ  
to continue his work of reconciliation  
and reveal you to the world.  
Forgive us the sins which tear us apart;  
give us the courage to overcome our fears  
and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen

And now to this morning's reading which is taken from 1 Peter 2:4-10 if you wish to follow.

### **Reading – 1 Peter 2:4-10**

<sup>4</sup> As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— <sup>5</sup> you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.”

<sup>7</sup> Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

<sup>8</sup> and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

### **Talk**

The abbot of a monastery called a novice into his office and instructed him to give the homily at the next morning's chapel.

The novice was struck with fear. The next morning, chapel came. He stood in the pulpit. The brothers were there. His hands were trembling. His knees were knocking. His voice was quivering. There was a long pause before he first spoke, and then he asked a question. “Do you know what I'm going to say?”

They had no idea, so all of their heads went back and forth almost in unison, as if it were choreographed. He said, “Neither do I. Let's stand for the benediction.”

The next day was almost an exact repeat of the day before. All the brothers sat there before him. His hands shook. His knees knocked. His voice trembled. Long pause. “Do you know what I'm going to say?” he asked.

Well, after the previous day's experience, they had a pretty good idea. So all of their heads nodded yes. “Then there's no need for me to tell you. Let's stand for the benediction.”

The abbot was angry beyond description. He brought the young man into his office and said, "If you do that again, you are going to be in solitary confinement, eat bread and water for thirty days, and receive any other punishment I can think of. Tomorrow morning, give the homily; do it right."

The third day, chapel attendance hit an all-time high. Everyone was there to see what he would say, and it was almost an exact repeat. He stood, trembling, voice quivering, and after a long silence asked, "Do you know what I'm going to say?"

After three days of this, about half of them had a pretty good idea and they nodded their heads yes.

The other half noticed the switch from day to day, and they weren't sure what to expect, and so they shook their heads no.

The novice observed this and said, "Let those who know tell those who don't. Let us stand for the benediction."

When it comes to sharing their faith, some people, like that novice in a monastery, are struck with fear. Their hands tremble. Their knees knock. Their voice quivers, and they end up speechless. Even though they want to introduce their family and friends to Jesus, they're not sure how and they fear rejection. They fear getting it wrong, and therefore being a stumbling block to people encountering Christ. Today we are going to find out that we should be not be afraid.

This passage is one of the most profound of the letter and a great treasure for the church in all generations. Christians often neglect the fact that re-birth brings them into God's family, into his special community. They understand they are God's 'sons and daughters' and think of their relationship with their Father, but they fail to see the importance that God gives to the other members of the family, to those whom we call brothers and 'sisters'. This is what the church is all about but, interestingly, Peter does not use the word. In fact here he is much closer to calling the Christian community 'Israel', for he teaches us about the church with ideas and words that were applied in the Old Testament to Israel. To use the apostle Paul's words, we are 'the body of Christ' and must understand that we need each other as we live for the Lord and serve him and each other.

Sir Michael Costa was a great orchestral Conductor of the 19th Century. It is said that one day he was conducting a rehearsal in which the orchestra was joined by a great choir. Midway through the session the piccolo player stopped playing. It seemed innocent enough – after all who would miss the tiny piccolo amidst the great mass of instruments blazing away? All of a sudden Sir Michael stopped the entire orchestra and choir. "Stop! Stop! Where's the piccolo? What's happened to the piccolo?"

We may sometimes feel like that piccolo player – that we don't have much to offer, that if we stopped coming to church, no one would notice anyway. Yet the Great Conductor notices, and needs us all to complete his orchestral masterpiece!

In this wonderful section Peter develops the corporate identity of God's people, describing them as a 'spiritual house' and a holy priesthood'. Their new birth means they have come out of one group of people who were not a people' and been brought into a new people who 'are the people of God'.

Christ is the essential foundation of this community of God's people. As the apostle takes us back into the Old Testament, he is not saying that they should become Jews. Rather he is saying that the Gentile church is part and parcel of the whole people of God built on the same foundation of Jesus Christ. In my opinion, what Peter writes in the following verses is one of the most missed and often deliberately avoided teachings of Scripture. Never did the church of the western countries need to study these ideas more earnestly than in today's individualistic world.

The idea of the 'stone' in this passage plays on two different reactions to Jesus. A stone can be a wonderful solid foundation on which to build a substantial structure. Yet a stone can also cause a person to stumble. If someone fails to see a rock or stone on a footpath and trips they can stumble and fall. This is exactly what happens as people encounter Jesus. Some find that they stumble. They do not see him for who he is. They miss seeing him altogether and so fall down. Others see him and believe and then obey him. For them Jesus becomes a foundation stone of the building into which they are being drawn.

The 'stone' who is Jesus brings life to his people. But his people are also like stones being built by God's Spirit into a structure, as it were, within which (or among whom) God will be praised. They will witness to him and live for him. They will not be 'shamed'.

Nevertheless, the other side of this stone is that some will stumble and will be shamed. Peter quotes Isaiah to make his point: 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' Since the stone is Jesus, it is the reaction of people to what they hear of Jesus that determines whether they stumble or not. Peter makes this clear: They stumble because they disobey the message. The message is the gospel of salvation in Christ and the need for faith in him. This disobedience probably refers to a prolonged and adamant opposition to the gospel and the message of the Lord as, for example, in the days of Noah. Those who do not turn in faith to Jesus have disobeyed and so face judgment.

As they have over the centuries, most Christians rightly preach and speak about Christ to their friends and their neighbours. Yet, sadly, often only a part of the truth about Jesus is really talked about. In many conversations and in much pulpit preaching Jesus is being 'sold short' to the world. Most will say: Jesus is the loving Saviour (which he is). Jesus is the one who died for us and showed God's love to us (which he is). Jesus is full of mercy and compassion and reveals the depths of God's grace (which he is and does). Jesus is the cornerstone or foundation stone on which the church is built and which holds the church together.

However, it is not so common to find Jesus presented as one who may cause some to stumble (which he does). Jesus is the rock that makes some fall (which he does). Jesus is rejected by many (which he is). The point is that this side of the gospel is not the most attractive and yet it is vital if we are truly to talk about who Jesus is. When people come

before Jesus, the living God, they come before a loving Saviour and a Judge. Many people will come to him and find a Saviour in whom they trust. Others take a look and see a person in whom they will not believe because they do not like what they see. They see him as Lord and do not want to obey. They see him as a judge and fear him and turn away and they stumble.

As we speak of Jesus, we must be aware that if we present him truly to people, we should expect both reactions. It is not our fault if, having presented the Jesus before whom all people will one day stand as they meet the judge, we find some 'stumble and 'fall'. In other words, some turn away from Christ and will eventually face his judgment. We cannot cover-up who Jesus is in all his glory and, for many, that will mean revealing a Jesus whom they will reject. Watering down the gospel, ignoring judgment, never speaking about the final day of Christ's return, will never make it easier for people to become Christians, because the moment they truly become interested they will ask questions and find out that they have been cheated!

However, there is another important aspect of what Peter teaches here. As Christians we must remember that it is always Jesus who is the capstone or foundation stone and it is he who people will stumble over, if they do. It is our great task to ensure that we never present any other stumbling stone than Jesus. If people stumble on Jesus, it is in God's hands because that is how he has laid out the road to salvation. But it is all too easy for Christians themselves to put stumbling blocks other than Jesus in the path of people. It is all too easy to communicate with people that their behaviour is unacceptable, or their life-style is not good enough, and so put a stumbling block in the path of the gospel. Christians must remember that new birth must occur before people will even be able to recognise that behaviour may need to change!

Obedience seen in a life lived for God will be a response to grace, and never a way to salvation. Paul Gardener remembered one self-identified 'uneducated working class man' saying to him once when he was a minister in Cambridge: Paul, do you know how long it took me even to be able to listen to the gospel? The gospel was always preached by educated people who dressed differently and spoke differently and who showed they didn't really like my culture or the area where I lived.'

No doubt it was not deliberate, at least for the most part, but clearly, a number of stumbling blocks had been put in front of this man that had prevented him, for a long time, from being able to listen to Jesus. We can all make this sort of mistake and often do, but let's keep in mind the apostle Paul's words, 'For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified'. Some will stumble and never come to faith but, if they do, we must ensure that it is because they have truly encountered Jesus and not some prejudices or ideas that they reject in us, the messengers.

We may also see another important application of this passage. We live in an age where we are told that one of the greatest problems people face is 'alienation'. This is especially true among people in the so-called 'western' societies. Families have broken down, people move far from home for work. Community life is almost non-existent, and people generally miss

'belonging'. Interestingly, one of the reasons internet 'social media' is so addictive is that it is now providing a form of community and of human interaction for people who for so long have missed it.

It is said that during the Second World War some soldiers serving in France wanted to bury a friend and fellow soldier who had been killed. Being in a foreign country they wanted to ensure their fallen comrade had a proper burial. They found a well-kept cemetery with a low stone wall around it, a picturesque little Catholic church and a peaceful outlook. This was just the place to bury their friend. But when they approached the priest, he answered that unless their friend was a baptised Catholic, he could not be buried in the cemetery. He wasn't.

Sensing the soldier's disappointment, the priest showed them a spot outside the walls where they could bury their friend. Reluctantly they did so.

The next day the soldiers returned to pay their final respects to their fallen friend but could not find the grave. "Surely we can't be mistaken. It was right here!" they said. Confused, they approached the priest who took them to a spot inside the cemetery walls. "Last night I couldn't sleep" said the priest. "I was troubled that your friend had to be buried outside the cemetery walls, so I got up and moved the fence.

It is surely important for Christians to see that this passage (and much of Scripture!) emphasises the idea of community and of belonging' of being on the other side of the fence. When we come to faith we are born again into God's church, into a community of people, the family that belongs to him.

It should not surprise us that one of the most effective ways of reaching out to people with the gospel is to invite them to enter our community and to come and see a people who love each other and have actual face to face contact with each other (when COVID restrictions allow!). One of the most effective tag lines the church has used both internally and externally, as we present the gospel to people, and to encourage Christians to take the church and their part in it seriously, has simply been 'enter your community'. Never underestimate what Peter has really said in this passage as he has spoken of being a holy people 'belonging to God'. It is a powerful message for Christians and non-Christians alike.

All Christians should rejoice in the great blessings and inheritance that belong to those who believe. It is these magnificent blessings that Peter spells out for all who have not stumbled but are truly a people belonging to God. Here are a people who are truly special, not because they have done anything to deserve being chosen or belonging to God, but because they have received mercy. This is God's salvation in action. This is all about his mercy to an undeserving people.

Peter turns to Hosea to fill out the wonder of this gospel message. Israel had rejected God and had not been God's people. They lived under judgment, yet the prophet also foresaw God's mercy and how people would be forgiven and become God's people again. God's mercy and salvation had been seen in Israel, so Peter sees a parallel with the Christians to whom he writes. They had once not believed. They had at one time not received mercy.

They had not belonged as a people to God, but now they are God's. Now they belong. Now they have received mercy.

They have received God's mercy and moved, as it were, from one sphere of existence to another. They have moved from darkness to live in the Lord's wonderful light. God's mercy is his calling in action. These former non-believers and former Jews have joined a people from all over the world who also belong to God, a people who have looked to Jesus as their foundation and cornerstone.

This calling says Peter, has a purpose. It is that you may declare the praises of him...Here is the goal of the church and of Christian life. It is not centred in us and our well-being. It is not about finally finding satisfaction, though in Christ we do find it. It is not about having wonderful fellowship in the church, though we should have it. Our final goal and greatest fulfilment in life as individuals and as God's own called people, the church, is to bring him glory and praise and to speak about it to those around us.

Here there is no possibility of being smug or being arrogant as Christians because our desire is to point all the time to God and his work in Christ. There can be few greater joys for Christians than pointing out God's mercy, and his calling, and his grace. It is our work and calling to shine the light back on God through our holy lives and through our resounding praise and invite people into our community.

Amen.

Before we finish today with a blessing I thought it would be good to share our faith together in response to the passage this morning, speaking of God's community. So I'm going to read out The Apostle's Creed, and if you know it speak along or just listen to the words.

### **Creed**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

and he will come to judge  
the living and the dead.

I believe in Jesus Christ,  
his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.  
Amen.

On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

I hope you have a fantastic week. Restrictions are being lowered tomorrow on Monday and you can see family and friends a little bit more which is really exciting. But to send us on our way, a final blessing.

May the road rise up to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

the rains fall soft upon your fields

and, until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of His hand

Amen