

Sermon preached at St Lawrence, Lechlade, 20 May, 2017

1 Peter 2: 1-12

I have to confess to being a little confused. Some will say, “that's not very surprising!” I thought this was to have been the first in a new series of sermons *on the nature and calling of the Church*. However, having listened (I do listen) to Andrew's sermon on Jesus and the two disciples on the Emmaus Road and David's on the activities of the first ever church in Jerusalem, recorded at the end of Acts 2, I think this one now marks the third in the series. Maybe you are getting three for the 'price of one'! It is not important how they are categorised; for the next few weeks, we will be looking at different aspects of *the life and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ*.

I would like to begin with a question: why do you think the Gospels were placed at the beginning of the NT? The obvious answer is that they record the beginning of the immediate history which led (40 days after the resurrection) to the beginning of this new community, called *ekklesia*, called out to serve God's purposes in the world. That is a perfectly good answer, but not the one I was looking for. My answer would be, because, if the Church is to be fully understood, the declaration by Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, that “the kingdom of God is at hand,” has to precede its birth.

So, if we now concentrate on the passage in 1 Peter (p. 230) we can see that the context in which Peter places his reflection on the Church is the experience of new life in God's kingdom. This happens through a new birth, the result of receiving the truth of the “good news of Jesus Christ” (1:23). Those who have responded to God's word, which “endures for ever” (1:25), are now called to live as members of his kingdom - “to love one another deeply from the heart” (1:22).

This new life, a gift of God's sheer grace, has both a negative and a positive part to it. *The negative* is to get rid of (or take off, as if we were undressing) the destructive acts of the old life: **malice** - the desire to harm others; **guile** (or **deceit**) - pretending to be faithful followers of Jesus, whilst really being centred on one's own aspirations; **envy** - perhaps the complaint that one does not receive the credit and gratitude one deserves, and, finally, **slander** - running down the reputation of others by pointing out their faults and weaknesses. None of these attitudes has any place within the kingdom, which we have joined by a spiritual birth, brought about by the Holy Spirit.

The positive part is to behave as new-born babes do: to “long for the pure spiritual milk.” The reference is to God's word. This is contrasted with the deceit and insincerity, just mentioned in 2:1,

which belongs to the old world of spiritual and moral darkness. God's word is always pure; rightly handled, it will never deceive. Many have accused Christianity of being a *delusion* (Richard Dawkins, for example) – defined in one dictionary as “an erroneous idea, in which the subject's belief is unshaken by facts.” Others have used the word *illusion* (Sigmund Freud, for example) – defined as “a deceptive impression of reality.” The arguments of both are based on a profound ignorance of its proper claims. In actual fact, God's word is the measure of all truth. Peter says that it is as essential to spiritual growth, as a mother's milk is essential to that of an infant.

The passage, then begins with an exhortation to live a holy life and ends in the same way: “abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (2:11). In between the apostle proclaims the reality of the meaning of the Church. He moves from the individual to the community and uses four different metaphors (or images) to describe the Church: a family, a house, a group of priests and a nation (or people). In the first instance, the image changes dramatically from a living baby to a living stone (2:2 +4). Not so surprising, for a comparison can be made between the two. The baby belongs to a family and grows up within a family of close relatives. The stone becomes part of a house (as we witness every day in the Cotswolds!). In both cases, belonging to something much bigger than an individual is indispensable. Belonging to the Church (whether seen as family or house) is essential for growth; new birth is an individual matter, but to continue in the way of Jesus, it is absolutely necessary to belong to a community. Faith is personal; but if it remains alone, it will wither and die. I am much impressed by how Christian students go about their evangelistic ministry in our Universities: as soon as a student makes a confession of faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, they are introduced into a local church fellowship. That is exactly the right emphasis.

The main metaphor for the Church in this passage is that of a building. Every believer in Jesus is likened to an individual stone (2:5). Together with Jesus, they gradually take the shape of a house. Jesus represents the three main stones: the **foundation**, the **corner** and the **coping** stone. He is the one who holds the whole building together, giving it its essential strength.

Now, “this house” (2:4) stands out amongst every human society, nation and culture because it represents a community rejected, in principle, by those who “disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (2:8). Thus, in part, the Church is defined as a society opposed by those who find Jesus a stumbling-block (2:7-8). It is a society, therefore, of people who are not ashamed of Jesus.

According to God's word, those who reject it belong to the 'world,' as a place that is organised in opposition to God. The world, thus understood, is in a sorry state. Having disobeyed God's word, they are handed over to their own devices to search for what it means to be human, what is good to believe and to do. They are under the control of the 'spirits of this age,' who direct human affairs. In

a number of places the NT uses the word 'futility' to describe the present condition of the world in its rebellion against its Creator. Futility has a range of meanings, such as *emptiness*, *meaninglessness* and *frustration*. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that those who have entered his kingdom and follow him do not belong to the world in this sense, as he said to his disciples: “they are not of the world, even as I am not of it.”

Inevitably the Church is despised by those who belong to the world, or to this age, as contrasted to the age of the kingdom. It should not, therefore, in the least surprise us that Christians are persecuted in many parts of the world; even in this country, freedom to believe and to proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus is gradually being eroded: “if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also (John. 15:20); “Jesus is the stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (2:8). Peter addresses the whole letter to *the exiles* (1:1). In this passage he refers to them as *aliens and exiles* (2:11), i.e. those who, when they leave their former beliefs and follow Jesus, are cast out of their homes, their towns and villages, and spurned by their own relatives: “they malign you as evil-doers” (2:11).

Everything in this passage points to a marked contrast between the Church and the world. The founder of Psychoanalysis, Freud (already mentioned), proposed that humankind is consumed by two basic instincts: the *craving for life* and the *death-wish*. He reckons to have based it both on clinical observation and on the obvious fact that we have been programmed to reproduce ourselves and eventually to die. He was a militant atheist and, therefore, did not believe in any reality beyond the grave.

The image of the Church changes again in 2:9. The Church is now likened to a race, a priesthood, a nation and a people. The early Church referred to itself as 'the Third Race' – neither Jews nor Gentiles, but a merging of both. God is creating something different, original, a new group of people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”, who sing that “salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb” (Rev. 7:10). A race, a nation, a people, a new society with aims and ideals quite distinct from those of the age which is passing away. **This is the Church.** There is no body remotely like it on earth, in both its diversity and unity.

If we return to the image of the house made up of individual stones, we may borrow from Jesus' own imagery of the city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. From the house, God's light shines forth to illuminate a world stumbling in darkness. It has been entrusted with a message of eternal good news that humans, their societies and cultures can be freed from self-inflicted confusion, despair and destruction – all that slowly extinguishes the people God created us to be: “you are the light of

the world,” says Jesus; what a challenge, what a responsibility!

From this exceedingly rich description of the nature of the Church, drawn in pictures from everyday life, Peter spells out the Church's mission very plainly. He speaks of four parts:

- “to offer spiritual sacrifices;”
- “to observe lives of purity;”
- “to follow exemplary lives among our neighbours;”
- “to proclaim the reality of God and of the new world he is bringing into being.”

“*To offer spiritual sacrifices*” means living every aspect of our lives as acts of worship to God. We naturally think first of corporate worship, individual and shared prayer. But spiritual sacrifices also touch our human relationships, our work, our hobbies, our thinking and our service to others, so that, through us, God may be recognised as Creator, Saviour and Guide of human life and glorified.

“*To observe lives of purity*” may be summed up as walking in God's light (2:9): first of all to be truth-tellers, never to deceive or dissemble, but to cultivate honesty and sincerity at all times; to be consistent in our dealings with all.

“*To follow exemplary lives among our neighbours*” (2:12). Whatever view they may have of Christian faith, and it will probably be distorted, we are to be constant in our way of life. The life-style choices of Christian believers are to be wholly determined by being disciples of Jesus. Whatever the world may think of us, because of our faith, even that in their eyes we are evil, we follow the rules of His kingdom. Those who have not come to Jesus, “the living stone,” as far as the kingdom is concerned, still live in darkness (2:9). At the same time, there are many legitimate pastimes, for God created us to enjoy his creation and to beautify it.

Finally, “*to proclaim the reality of the true God.*” This will be accomplished by our lives, drawing on all the resources of God's grace, by correcting mistaken ideas about the nature of Christian belief and action, presenting the truth about the only God, as he is in Jesus Christ, and not least by portraying the Church, as God's revolutionary idea.

Here, then, in this passage, we find rich imagery that explains the meaning of the Church (a family, house, people and priesthood) and points towards the life and witness to which this society is called day by day. Ask the Lord to give you further insights into His mighty acts, which has brought this community about. (Repeat 2:9).