

## On the First Letter of Peter (4)

*Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight. Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

1 Peter 2.2-10

Here the Apostle Peter uses one of his most evocative images to describe those of us who have received the gifts of the resurrection and been brought back into the embrace of God: he calls us *‘living stones’*, part of a spiritual house – a *‘temple of the Holy Spirit’*, as St Paul, too, puts it:

*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*

1 Corinthians 6.19-20; cf 1 Corinthians 3.16



There follows what in Jewish Biblical commentary is called a *midrash* – a combination of Biblical texts from all sorts of places blending around a specific theme. We find this a lot in the New Testament, too, especially in the texts which describe the *Passion of the Lord*, or the *‘Pascha’* – the entire

event from Jesus’ death through to his resurrection – as well as in the writings of St Paul. Here they include references throughout the Bible:

*Therefore says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: 'One who trusts will not panic.'* Isaiah 28.16

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.* Psalm 118.22

*Jesus said to them, 'Have you never heard in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'* Matthew 21.42-44

*They – who rely on their own strength instead of faith – have stumbled over the stumbling-stone, as it is written, 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'* Romans 9.32-33

We can see that some of these quotations are subtly modified, to draw out of the existing texts a newly nuanced meaning, and especially to show how they can be applied to the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf in and through the Paschal Mystery – something which we either accept or reject; but on the basis of which we are welcomed back into the embrace of God, or not. This way of interpreting one text in the light of another is called *intertextuality*, and the early Christian writings are full of it. It reflects a belief that we can't properly make sense of Jesus Christ unless we interpret him through the text of the *Old Testament*; and that we can't properly understand the Old Testament itself except as a testimony to *Jesus Christ*. Here we can see that this process was already fluent in the first generations after the resurrection, and that it went back to the way in which Jesus had interpreted and explained himself in the teachings which are recorded in the Gospels. In particular, let us notice that part of the fruit of the faith which is guided and informed by this way of reading and re-reading the Bible is that we shall be liberated from the effects of *shame*. We can see also that for Peter (the same is true especially in Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians) this faith is exemplified also in our becoming more *mature*, as we *grow up* into 'the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4.13). May that indeed be true of you and me.