

10th May 1 Peter 2:2-10 and Acts 7:54-60

Whenever I read today's passage, I am taken back over 30 years to the day of my confirmation. The only thing I remember about the occasion was that the bishop preached on a passage about living stones. This stuck in my memory because at the time I was growing Lithops from seed. These are succulents native to Namibia and South Africa that are also known as Living Stones.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qViDZOa6EcA>

Unfortunately I don't remember anything else about the bishop's sermon, which is a great shame as it would have made the task of writing this reflection much easier!

The apostle Peter wrote this letter to newly converted Christians in Asia Minor who, perhaps like us, were in need of encouragement during a difficult period. In today's passage he gives them, and us, two images to help us understand who we are and how we are to live – spiritual milk and living stones.

Firstly, let's think about spiritual milk. Milk is an amazing substance, it contains everything a baby needs to thrive and grow for the first six months of life. The spiritual milk mentioned in this passage presumably also contains everything we need to thrive and grow spiritually. So what is this spiritual milk? I did a little Google search and came up with answers as diverse as doctrine, the Bible, the message of God, and Christ himself. Perhaps the answer is all of them and more, in fact whatever feeds us and grows us into the likeness of Christ.

You might remember the questions Helen asked last Sunday,

- Where are your green pastures and still waters?

- What nourishes and restores you?

Your answers to these questions might you reflect on what is spiritual milk for you.

This image of a baby eagerly feeding strikes me as bitter-sweet, which perhaps reflects something of my personal experience of motherhood. Before I had children of my own I had only held a baby once and had absolutely no idea of what was to come. I had a naïve, idealized image of sweet babies, placidly sleeping in their mother's arms occasionally whimpering delicately when they wanted milk. I had no idea that this beautiful new creature would howl incessantly when she got hungry, that she would cry as if in terrible pain if the milk she so desperately needed wasn't provided rapidly, no matter the time of day or night. But then there was the contented silence as she fed, the peaceful resting as she digested – until the colic kicked in and she starting crying again!

So when I read that we are to be *Like newborn infants, longing for the pure, spiritual milk* I feel like there is a sense of urgency, almost compulsion in there, that once we have *tasted that the Lord is good* there is really nowhere else to turn, nothing else that will satisfy. So how does it feel when we have neglected our relationship with God for a while? Like an inner desperation? Or a more subtle sense of dissatisfaction that turns

into a gnawing hunger? Or maybe our spiritual thirst withers away? The invitation here is to recognise our spiritual hunger and go to the source before we starve.

Now let's take a look at the second image that Peter gives us, that of living stones. Very early Christians were sometimes accused of being atheists because they didn't have any of the usual trappings of religion – no temples, priests or sacrifices. These early followers of Christ hadn't yet developed their faith into a formalized religion. They probably felt like something was missing, they may have missed their rituals and visiting the temple. Similarly, for the last few weeks we have been unable to meet in our church buildings and despite our best efforts with youtube and zoom, our usual religious practices have been disrupted. And yet, we are still a church.

We have had to adapt to a new reality, we have found new ways to worship together, new ways to support and encourage each other. With his next image, Peter encouraged these early Christians that together they had been built into a temple in which they could act as priests and offer spiritual sacrifices. Instead of God dwelling in the temple, behind the curtain in the holy of holies, God now lived within them by his holy spirit. We too can be assured that the Holy Spirit dwells within us, that we can still read and pray and meet with God in the silence and in our groups, even though we may be doing so in new ways. Priests and buildings, rituals and religious practices may well help us draw close to God, but God has already drawn close to us in Christ. We can rest in his peace, safe in the knowledge of his love for us, while also looking forward to the time when we can return to worship together in our churches as ONE physical body.

The next image needs us to imagine a building made of stone, perhaps like one of our churches. No single stone stands out, and the walls are only solid because each stone is in its proper place. Peter says we are like living stones and that we should let ourselves be built into a spiritual house. We are to humbly let ourselves be built – we are single stones in a bigger structure. The limited narrative of our own lives is part of a far bigger story. Peter names Christ as the cornerstone, we are to align ourselves with him.

I imagine that this confinement has been particularly difficult for those of you in the 'at-risk' category who have been told to stay at home and to not even shop for yourselves. You who have been used to living in and contributing to society like anyone else have been told that you can't do a lot of that any more. In a crisis, you would have been the ones shopping for isolated people, and helping out in other ways. I imagine there is a risk that you might feel like you aren't contributing any more – but I hope you realize that you *are* playing a vitally important part with your prayers, kind messages, hours spent virtually with family or friends, and in just being who you are in Christ.

Not only that, but since you have ALREADY let yourselves be built into the church like the living stones Peter writes about, La Côte church is a strong community that is reaching out to help. In the many ways, large and small, that you have shaped the culture and character of who we are as a community and kept the focus on Christ the cornerstone.

Today we remember St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He faced his death with great courage and grace, because he had been nourished by his faith in Christ. He was humbly willing to die for Christ, knowing that his life could have meaning as one living stone in the greater building of the church. And surely it is not a coincidence that Saul oversaw Stephen's execution. This Saul later became the apostle Paul, who through his writings has had a massive impact on the church ever since.

Perhaps you have become more aware of your spiritual hunger during this period of confinement, or have had to face yourself in new ways. As things start to return to some sort of normality, there is the risk that our spiritual needs get forgotten as we get our usual distractions back. The challenge is to keep ourselves hungry for God and to feed ourselves spiritually (in all the ways that you have mentioned in the chat and others).

Try to keep in mind that we are part of something bigger – our local church, yes, but also the global church and the church throughout history and into the future. We each have our part to play as stones that make up this building – all important, yet all needing each other and all dependent on Christ the cornerstone to keep us straight and true. Let us humbly allow God to place us where he wants us and to use us as he chooses.