

## 10 May 2020, The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter: 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:4

In 1<sup>st</sup> Peter we are given a word-picture for the Church and our work as Jesus followers: *Come to him (Jesus), a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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.*

Peter calls Jesus a *living* stone. In the ancient world the adjective “living” meant moving; ‘living water’ is ‘on the move.’ Therefore, Jesus is not a rock that ‘sits there,’ but a moving rock with dynamic power. ‘Living’ may also conjure the image of an uncut, natural rock; not quarried and squared but with angles and edges. Jesus is a living stone and Peter calls us to become like living stones, fitted into a spiritual house. We are to be living, moving, filled with the Spirit; without cookie-cutter corners so God ‘fits us in’. Peter writes: “...*let yourselves be built into a...*” and gives three images. The passive voice reminds us indicates this is God’s work among us.

*Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.* Early Christians would be reminded of the Temple—the center of God’s presence among mortals. More than a gathering place for prayer and worship; Jesus described the Temple as God’s ‘footstool’ an extension of God’s heavenly throne. The Temple is also described as the Gate of Heaven, through which the faithful enter. The Christian assembly and the place of assembly is a sure, rock-solid place for God’s glory to be known, experienced and celebrated.

We are *built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...*” We all are given the vocation which only priests had in the Old Testament. There is no longer a special class to mediate God’s presence to us. We are all called to priesthood, because, just as priests were anointed with oil, we follow the anointed one (the meaning of the Greek ‘Christ’ and the Hebrew ‘Messiah’); we are Christians, anointed ones. St Augustine commented: “*In ancient times only one High Priest was anointed, but now all Christians are anointed.*” There is no longer a special class solely responsible for God’s work. We are all called according to God’s purposes and the Holy Spirit’s gifts, to share in the Church’s ministry of intercession, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The third image is: “...*to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” The New Testament teaches us the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, especially Hebrews 9 and Romans 12. We need also know the three primary sacrifices of the Old Testament.

First is the Whole Offering (Holocaust)—the consumption by fire of the entire animal on the Altar; the worshiper laid hands on the animal’s head—a gesture of self-identification. Through the offering of the animal, the worshiper offers her/himself to God.

Next is the Peace Offering—the intention is to re-establish peace and fellowship between God and mortals and within the human family. Only the animal’s fat was burned on the Altar; the rest was shared with the priest and the worshiper’s household, as a sign of the re-established community.

Third is the Sin and Guilt Offering—the intention is to take away the effects of transgression, whether deliberate or unintentional.

In Jesus, and therefore in us united to his priesthood, all three sacrifices operate. Paul wrote, “*I beseech you by the mercies of God to present yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship*” (Rom 12:1). This speaks to the Whole Offering: we do not offer animals on our behalf, we offer our selves, all that we are and have in God’s service. Not a part but the whole spirit, mind and body; our thoughts and actions, our intentions, our wills, our sins and triumphs.

Likewise, we offer ourselves for peace, seeking, with God’s help to live in and through Christ that forgiveness, forbearance, reconciliation and community are made real.

And we offer ourselves for the sins of others. Intercession is more than simply praying for others’ needs. Intercession is this: you and I stand before God on behalf of those who cannot or will not stand before God. This surely includes the sick and suffering, stumblers and sinners, and those without faith or lost faith. *While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...*; our priesthood is an extension and embodiment of Jesus’ sacrifice for the world’s salvation. The Church stands where the whole world should be standing—seeking God’s forgiveness, knowing God’s loving-kind mercy, praising and adoring the God of love. In the world its everyone for her/himself; in the Church its everyone for someone else.

*Come to Jesus, a living stone....chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.*” Amen.