

Fifth Sunday of EASTER, April 20 2008
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5,15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle

Come to him, a living stone.

It might seem strange at first to think of stones as being alive. In fact, stones have a long social and biblical history. The Romans were the first to use stones to make roads that would stand up in all seasons. Stones were used for negative and lethal purposes such as stoning people to death as we have recorded in the first reading this morning. And then, we also have accounts of them being used as symbols of God's presence. In Genesis we read that when Jacob was on the run from Beersheba to Haran, running in fear of his brother Esau, he stopped for the night, took a stone for a pillow and had a dream of a ladder stretching from heaven to earth, Yahweh was at the top of the ladder and promised him the land of Canaan. The author of Genesis writes that, *Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.* In other words, he found the place to be holy; the stone that had been his pillow became an altar to Yahweh and Jacob changed the name of the place from "Luz" to "Bethel" which means "house of God." Jacob went on to make a vow that if all went well for him on his journey, the stone he set up, as an altar would become a house of God.

In the Book of Exodus we read: *Moses was ordered by Yahweh to carve out two tablets of stone and it was on them that God wrote the Ten Commandments. When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do."... Moses got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot*

of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

In the First book of Samuel we read about David facing Goliath and, with a single stone in his sling, killed the giant and saved his people. In Psalm 91 we read, *If you make the Most High your dwelling-- even the Lord, who is my refuge-- then no harm will befall you, For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.* And in Psalm 118 we read: *The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

In the Book of the prophet Isaiah we read: *So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.*

It's this background of understanding stones to be alive, to hold life, that Peter writes to those who are new to Christianity. Today we have a tendency to decorate our tables with stones in glass bowls. Of course these stones have been properly washed and evenly rounded so they will look pretty. Unlike us in the twenty-first century, the people to whom Peter was writing were a people of the land, they walked on stones, they used stones to fight off wild animals, they used stones to build homes and stones to create sacred altars.

Peter tells them *Come to him, 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.*

In the gospel of today we have the same use of this concept of a spiritual dwelling when Jesus says, *In my Father's house there are many dwelling places*. Jesus is not talking literally about a building. He is talking about having a relationship with God. John uses the same word for home, elsewhere when Jesus says, *“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*

To be built into a spiritual house is to allow God to mold us into a spiritual relationship; to open our hearts, our ears, our mind so that we can think, hear, see, feel the presence of God within and all around us. We are to be the rocks on which the church is built. God is calling each and every one of us to stand firm in our relationship to God and not to be afraid to share this love, compassion and forgiveness. To be available to God we have to sacrifice ourselves, our cultural beliefs etc so that we can become *a holy people*.

Peter is aware that for some people the spiritual life is a stumbling block. We are more comfortable talking about it than making it a reality in our daily lives. It's easier to talk about spirituality than to make it a way of life. It's easier to buy a rounded stone than it is to find one and help reshape it. We want to be rounded but we don't want to be reshaped by the life God calls us to live as it makes demands on our time and our energy.

In the final year of my studies for my Doctorate in Ministry, I chose to write a paper on “living stones.” It was challenge to myself as I had come from a place and time that said that it was a waste of time and money

building large churches to be used once a week; to be building even larger cathedrals just for the sake of it.

One day as I literally flipped through the books sent to me for this particular course all I could see was stones, stones and more stones. Lots of pictures of various cathedrals past and present, some long since in need of repair and others were mere outlines of walls on the ground. The thought crossed my mind that there were scriptural references to stones crying out: Habakkuk 2:9-11 reads: *Woe to the one who builds a kingdom by unjust gain ...**The stones of the wall will cry out.*** In the Gospel of Luke 19:37-40 we read: *When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voicesSome of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the **stones will cry out.***

That summer our class visited a number of Cathedrals from London to Wales, to Coventry and across to Norwich and back to London. With each Cathedral I developed a love for the stones, particularly those way up at the top on the top level. These stones have stories behind them of wars, of blood spilt on them by Catholics, Protestants, Catholics, Anglicans. The mature gray-haired tour guides of these cathedrals projected a sense that they had attended the laying of the cornerstone of these edifices. In the stories they told about the building it was obvious they loved their church and its history that was, in a sense, written in stone. Touching the stones, the markings on them, those that had been painted, cut, carved, rolled for miles, left us all with a sense that each stone had a story to tell.

I once sat in a group with a Shaman who had each of us bring a stone to our circle time of silence. After looking at the stone in silence for some ten to fifteen minutes we were invited to share what we saw and how it made us feel. What was fascinating was that as each individual reported the story of what he or she saw in the stone they were reflecting their own lives and current emotions in response to that situation. Some laughed, others cried deeply, others experienced anger. The stones, we were told, were talking to us as we interpreted what it was we saw in them. This was no hokey psychology. From stones we have learned about the past lives, the make up of a community, etc. Stones will cry out to us if we listen.

Cathedral stones tell the story of some mystic in the middle ages whose vision of God was boundless space reaching up to the sky and translated into the drawings of a gifted architect and came alive in the hands of gifted stone masons.

Stones may not have a beating heart; break them and there is no blood shed. Yet, stones will tell stories provided we are patient enough to listen. *Be still and know that I am God.* Be still, embrace the stone, let it kindle the fire and the imagination within you and you will cry out what is most important within you. *The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made. let us rejoice and be glad in it. 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.*