

Brackley 800th Anniversary

1 Peter 2: 1-10

After a very long - and - let's not be shy -
rather dull sermon by the Bishop that morning
everyone filed out of church to greet him -
saying absolutely nothing about the sermon.

Until - eventually -
towards the end of the line
shaking his hand, someone said.

"Bishop, your sermon today reminded me of the peace and love of God!"

The Bishop was thrilled.

"Thank you!

I really wasn't sure I was hitting the spot this morning!

Can you say why? "

"Well - she said -

it reminded me of the Peace of God

because it passed all understanding

and the Love of God because it endured forever!"

It is a real joy to be with you this morning
as you celebrate 800 years of Christian
service and witness in Brackley.

I am sure I am not alone in having bypassed Brackley - many times - on the A43
of any idea that there was once an
Iron Age settlement here
and at least two Roman villas that we know of - before the Saxons arrived
and the name Brackley was settled.

As you will know far better than me,
Brachelai, [or Bracca's clearing] is mentioned in the Domesday Book,
listing 20 villagers,
10 smallholders, 6 slaves
and one priest!

Nearly two hundred years later,
the town was growing - in size and importance.

The market had become famous
for wool - and lace.

And it was one of only five towns
in the whole country
licensed for jousting tournaments

It was - host to an important meeting
between the King and his barons -
but just missed out on being the place
Magna Carta would be signed.

And then there's this lovely church
which they were adding significantly

as the Mongol hoardes were sweeping across
mainland Europe.

Mercifully, not down the A43!

You really wouldn't want *them* in Northampton, Archdeacon!

And when Henry III was On the throne
and Stephen Langton was Archbishop of Canterbury

Robert de la Hay was recorded as the first Vicar of this parish.

The year was 1223.

800 years ago this year - and we have every reason to celebrate.

Ten years ago, I was a guest at another
anniversary service in the rather lovely red-bricked synagogue in Reading
where the former Chief Rabbi, Lord Sachs
was preaching.

Right at the outset, he told us:

God doesn't live in buildings,
He lives in builders.

I wished I'd thought of that!

And as we celebrate 800 years of Christian witness here, as we give thanks our forebears
who built this place
it is good to remember that *God* is still
building His Church –

Building His people, up -

Breaking down every barrier between
Himself and humankind

and bridging all the troubled waters of this world He loves so much.

Three - very concrete ways
of thinking about God's mission - and our calling and purpose in it.

The Christian faith is always and ever about concrete reality – about real life in the here
and now

It has never been about abstractions.

Which is why our scriptures - are full of concrete images for God and His people.

In the Old Testament – in
the second book of Samuel,
and the Psalms,
and Isaiah –
God is acclaimed as Israel's rock –
utterly dependable and faithful.

And because He is rock-like and faithful,
the writer of Deuteronomy tells us that
God shelters His people.

Throughout the history of God's people
that's been important.

It still is today – as Christians - in Egypt,
and South Sudan, and India
live with fear and suffering and hardship –
as a daily reality.

Yes, hardship has always been the lot of God's people.

So much so that the rabbis joke that when,

after years of hardship,
God told Israel she was His chosen people –

the *people* asked if He might choose someone else for a change!

Because when the Israelites were put to slavery in Egypt,
they were not only enslaved to make bricks,
they had to move stone to build pyramids.

When the law was given to Moses
on Mount Sinai
it was carved into tablets of stone.

At Meribah - when the people were parched with thirst - bone-weary - and grumbling –
the rock which Moses struck with his staff released torrents of water.

A long time later - the patriarchs set up stones as they journeyed through the wilderness
–
to mark all the places where
God had spoken to them -
as holy ground.

To encourage those following on later
as they endured the same wilderness.

And so so they could find the place again –
and return to it - when they felt lost and
abandoned – to remember God's faithfulness.

And – well, we simply wouldn't be here if a
huge stone hadn't been rolled away
from an empty tomb!

And so here, in our first reading –
Peter – the rock –

describes Jesus as the foundation stone –
and – crucially - you and I as living stones
built upon and around Him.

God does not live in buildings;
He lives in builders.

That is quite a challenge!

Especially when we have - so many -
beautiful ancient buildings to maintain.

And it gets harder and harder to make inroads
into the communities we serve.

And yet, all is not lost.

Professor Linda Woodhead tells us
there are more people in this country
than we might think,
who have a real interest in the soul
and life after death.

It's just that they look for answers
everywhere and anywhere
other than the Church.

The fields are still ripe for harvest –
in fact they may be - more ready for harvest than they have been at any time
in the last forty years.

God does not live in buildings;
He lives in builders.

And, of course, our mission as God's people

is **not** to make sure we survive
in our present form.

But to make sure that God's reconciling,
life-giving hope
shines brightly in the heart of every community across these islands.

And - if we're going to work these ripe harvest fields - I think we're going to need to shift
from thinking of ourselves as churches
led by Vicars
meeting once a week for an hour's worship.

To thinking of ourselves as a movement –
a network - a Body –
of strong, faithful, inspired, welcoming,
forgiven, compassionate
and outward-looking people
lay and ordained
in partnership
radically committed to God
to one another
and to the communities we serve.

That's what this passage from 1 Peter is all about.
Everything in it speaks about our depending upon one other – and -
above all –
remaining firmly and squarely
fixed on Jesus Christ,
the one, true foundation stone of our life together.

This - of course - means we'll often find ourselves rubbing alongside people we feel we
don't quite fit with – all those rough and hard edges.....

And, of course - the truth is
the person sitting in the next pew

or the next office
is just as likely to find us
awkward and difficult.

Which is why we are commanded to love our neighbours

The Church is a movement -
it's not a social club,
or an interest group,
or even a lobby group.

We are God's building -
and Christ, the corner stone -
ties us all together.

We are living stones built together
into a spiritual house.

And I believe that,
like God - the rock of Israel's shelter -
we, as a community of living stones,
are called to provide shelter for those who are broken, wounded and hurt by this world.

We are called to be a safe place where God,
through us and with us,
can serve the people all around us.

If we're honest, we know perfectly well that we're not perfect building material.

Our behaviour and our frailties often
trail out behind us -
like the smears of oil colour
in a Francis Bacon portrait.

In fact, we're almost wired to take wrong turnings -

and fall into sin.

And when we do sin –
I'm sure you've noticed this –
our hearts harden -
and we become like stone –
exactly as Ezekiel said they would.

And so God, who knows all this
knows that if He is *going* to build His Church –
needs to do a new thing.

And He is.
Always - doing a new thing.

He is working constantly to shape us,
to make us fit for His purpose –
if we will only cooperate –
and He is doing that especially today.

Our task, as God's people here is,
quite simply, to place ourselves in His hands –
and trust Him to shape us as He needs –
whatever it is He needs to do to make us ready to love this world He loves
and is constantly working in for good.

Peter ends this part of his letter with a
thrilling list of adjectives
describing who we are as God's people.

Because we are living stones, he says we are a chosen people.

God's love is no accident.
He is always faithful.

He says we are a royal priesthood –
you and me, the church –
have been anointed with oil
and crowned to serve Him
in bringing His love to our broken,
hurting, divided world.

He says we are a dedicated nation,
And - unlike every nation in this world -
that needs strong borders to function,
we are called to be a nation *without* borders,
for which the only passport required
is the seal of baptism.

In which God claims each one of us as His own.

He's called us out of darkness to stand in His marvellous light.
Together, we are His people
and He is our God –
and it is so good to be here to celebrate
with you – my fellow living stones!

So, may God love you,
may He bless you and protect you
and stir up His gifts in you
as you give thanks for 800 years
of Christian service in this town

and look ahead to
what He has for you here at St Peter's
and with the people of Brackley.

Amen.