

## **Brackley 800<sup>th</sup> 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.