Hello,

I am the Revd Joan Allen and it is my pleasure to share with you some thoughts on this 5th Sunday of the Easter Season.

I am basing my reflection on one of our Lectionary readings for today; it is taken from the first Letter of Peter, Ch 2 v 2 -10

**Like new-born infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.**

**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, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:** **‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner’, and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.**

**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.**

This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God

If ever you have tried to establish a completely new garden, you will know that one of the problems you have to deal with is stone!! Your spade is forever hitting something hard. The earth is simply full of stones – large ones, small ones and everything in between!!! You quickly realise that if ever you are going to get to the point of planting anything, you have to get all the stones out – it is hard work, it takes a long time to do, and at the end you are still left with a large pile of stones to deal with.

For us, stones can be a nuisance, they get in the way.

And yet, during this time of lockdown, many of us are so very conscious that the stones of our church buildings echo to the sounds of silence. The buildings are out of action, the sacred spaces within those stone walls are temporarily inaccessible to those who seek solace, comfort and physical collective worship.

But this reading from Peter encourages us perhaps to pause and reflect on the stones that make up the church.

In this passage, the word ‘stone’ appears no less than six times in five verses.

 It helps us if we can understand a little of the context in which it was written. The Letter would have been heard and read by first century Jews who hoped that God would return to Zion, to Jerusalem, and live forever in the Temple there. So, the Temple would have to be rebuilt, to make it a proper dwelling place for God. There was a long tradition of speaking about the Temple being built on ‘the rock’ or ‘the cornerstone’ – find the right ‘stone’ and you may be on the way to building the Temple, ready for God to return.

There is also an added dimension to Peter’s words. In Hebrew the word ‘stone’ is very like the word for ‘son’ – in fact, in English three of the letters from ‘stone’ are used to make the word ‘son’. The Hebrew Scriptures noted God’s promise to David that his son would build the Temple in Jerusalem, and that this son of David would actually be the son of God himself. The royal son of God will build the Temple, and he will do so on the proper stone, the cornerstone.

Peter quotes from Isaiah : **‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’** But already the passage is taking on a different tone, with the ‘chosen, precious cornerstone’ no longer a physical stone itself, but a human being, the coming king, upon whom Israel’s God will build something quite new. Certainly this is how Peter seems to understand it in v6 where he says ‘believe in him’

Peter is in no doubt: Jesus himself is the ‘stone’ and the new Temple is already being built upon him. He is the ‘living stone’ (v 4), resonating with Psalm 118 v 22 where the builders discard one particular stone because it does not fit, only to find that when they get to the top of the wall, right in the corner, they need a stone of exactly that shape. Jesus was rejected by his own people, indicates Peter, because he did not fit with the plans they had at the time, but God had shown him to be the most important stone in the whole building, the one who wouldn’t fit anywhere else because only the most exalted place would do.

What Peter says about Jesus is crucial for all Christian life and devotion. He was encouraging scattered communities to assure them that they, too, are part of this new temple. God is no longer to live in a Temple in Jerusalem, but in the ‘spiritual house’ made up of ‘living stones’ which is being built by widespread Christian communities, wherever they may be.

Peter tells them that they are the ‘holy priesthood’ offering ‘spiritual sacrifices’ – they were to show the world what God had done.

This would have been difficult for first century ex-pagan converts in rural Turkey to comprehend. But Peter urges them to grasp it, and his letter shares with us too the responsibility we have to stretch our minds to understand these enormous truths; we are the stones upon which Christ’s temple is built, the temple of which Christ himself is the cornerstone. Only by being firmly anchored in the truth of who Jesus is as the cornerstone of our lives, and who we ourselves are as his followers, will we be able to live as we are meant to. This is not always easy and we too can be painfully aware that our stones do not always fit. Living out our faith can be difficult and often requires us to face challenges – indeed, the lectionary reading for today from Acts Ch 7 describes how Stephen was stoned to death for his faith. But in today’s Psalm 31 we are reminded that we have a ‘rock, a fortress to save us’ and John Ch 14 reassures us that God’s house has room for all.

Our church buildings are important, of course they are. There is something very comforting about the familiar, particularly when we are in such anxious times. Our buildings are much loved and precious to us, and we can feel quite distressed that we are unable to access them at the moment. But let us not forget that in our community we represent the stones of the church; we interlock and support each other with Christ as our cornerstone, we can be sure of the rock-solid foundations on which our faith is built, and we can encourage others to share the joy of knowing Christ. And when we return to our buildings, we must make sure that their stones do not get in the way, that they are not seen as a nuisance or a barrier to those who may be seeking to plant their own new garden.

Meanwhile….

Take care

Stay safe

Be kind

Amen