

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

LIVING STONES

10th May 2015

Matthew 7:7-11

1 Peter 2:1-10

Gillian has spoken to us about the work with young people in our presbytery which she initiates and coordinates, and I hope that you found that both interesting and encouraging. We all know that it is vitally important that the next generation hears and understands the good news of God's love for them given to us in Jesus. It is important for the future of the church – and we should not expect that future to look just like the past – but vitally, it is important for the young people themselves, that they hear and know that God loves them and are given the chance to respond to that love, in their own way. I am very glad that we have Gillian, but I would never want us to think that having her takes away the responsibility of sharing the good news and spreading God's love ourselves!

We read this morning two well-known parts of Scripture and they both talk about stones. The idea of the people of the church being like living stones which God is building, is one which I understand will be developed at the Heart and Soul event in Princes Street Gardens next Sunday and at the General Assembly. However we won't be there this year, so this morning I want us to think about what it means to be living stones.

The other short passage are words that Jesus spoke, painting the ridiculous picture of a parent giving a child a stone to eat, rather than bread. He is making the point that God would not do anything so mad either, but gives good and nourishing, useful gifts to his children, the gift of his love being the greatest gift of all.

Both these passages put me in mind of a great quote which I came across recently. You may have heard it before, but it was new to me. It is said that Agnes Broun, who was Robert Burns' mother, and outlived him by many years, seeing that a statue to her son had been erected, sighed and said: "Ah Robbie, ye asked them for bread and they hae gi'en ye a stane." You asked for bread but they have given you a stone. If there is one thing that as living stones we should never do, it is that. We should never give stones to the weak, weary, needy, lost hungry ones who come to us.

If you ask most people to draw a church, they will draw you a building, I probably would myself, but of course the building is not the church, just where the church meets for corporate worship. And yet stones, large, heavy, unyielding, unchanging stones is often what people think of when they hear the word "church". When St. Bride's church was built in Newtonmore it was important to use the stones of both former church buildings which it was replacing – and not only because it would be more economical that way. People were attached to their own stones! Someone said to me just last week that they expected that the roof and the toilets (or lack of them) in Laggan must be the most important thing on my mind just now – but I said that there was the greater matter of the

gospel. The church is not the buildings, and the buildings are or should be only important if they are to provide a place where God's people can learn to be living stones.

So how do we? The first thing that we are to do, according to Peter, is to get rid of the ways of the world. We have just come through an election campaign, and whatever you think of the outcome, you will probably have been aware over the past weeks of the various ways in which those campaigning tried to do down their opponents or rubbish their arguments. Now there are good discussions to be had about the governing of the country, and many of these did take place, but, as in every election campaign, there was a bit of dirty tricks-ing, of smearing and mis-representing, on purpose. And in a way, however we might have deplored it, we expected it. We expect politicians and would-be politicians and people involved in the political debate to do that from time to time. But as Christians we are not to be like that.

Unfortunately we can't lay our hands on our hearts and say that the Christian church has never been like that. Even in our own denomination, even now, there are Kirk Sessions or congregations where there are cabals and cliques, where there is plotting and scheming, and where people cannot trust each other. Peter says we are to get rid of that way of being with each other. And we are to come to Jesus who is described as a living stone. Jesus is a living stone. If we want to know what being a living stone looks like then we have Jesus to show us. Jesus who talked about God's love for us being like bread, not stones. Jesus who welcomed the outcasts and the prostitutes, those who nice people did not hang out with. Jesus whose hard words were kept for those who thought they knew all about God and how to please him, but who refused to condemn those who genuinely were seeking, no matter how their past and present testified against them.

The world is full of people who are seeking bread. Even this village is full of people who are seeking bread. Not the bread we can buy in the micro-store/Coop, necessary and good as that is, but bread, nourishment, food for the soul, for the inner self. People who need to know that they are welcomed, loved, that they matter. Some of them have backgrounds into which they would rather no one looked. Some of them have seen their friends die or move away and have been left old and lonely. Some of them are our young people. Some are living in chaos and others have ordered their lives precisely so that they need not acknowledge the inner cry for help which they cannot satisfy. But still they are asking for bread.

People in our country have a vast array of ways and places in which they can satisfy their physical hunger: many different cuisines to try, many places where they can buy a meal already cooked for them. But there is only one place one person, one way to satisfy the inner cry for nourishment, and that is by coming to Jesus.

Peter suggests that if we have tasted that the Lord is good – another bread-like reference, and one which may in fact refer to our participation in the Lord's Supper – if we have tasted the Lord is good, then we will want to keep growing up in Christ, keep growing towards salvation. For Peter salvation is not something that comes to us all at once, but something into which we grow as we come ever closer to Christ, the living stone. We are works in progress, not unyielding edifices, and if this is true for us as individuals, it also must be true for us as a church, for the church is made up of individuals, all of whom are still growing.

We will grow into salvation, and we will grow into the likeness of Christ who offered himself as nourishment, bread for the world. A few weeks ago we saw that one Easter job of the church is to forgive, and another is to be and provide communities of healing for our neighbours. Surely a third is to make sure that we are not people of hard edges, unpalatable, difficult to be with, but those who give nourishment to the world. And by the world I don't mean just the big wide world, but our little local world. Sometimes it is easier to talk about the world in the abstract than about our neighbours who are known flesh and blood, who are the people who may annoy or frustrate us, who may seem to have nothing in common with us or even to despise us. These are the ones for whom we are to provide nourishment.

To do this we need to do more than this gathering on a Sunday morning. Morning church in Scotland reaches about ten percent of the people and for that ten percent it meets their hunger, But there is another ninety percent out there, who will not be fed by what we do in morning church, and our challenge is to find ways of meeting their hunger as well, with the bread of heaven, which is Jesus, the living stone. We are doing this with Messy Church and in a different way with Rhyme time, but there are always more people to meet and feed. God grant that as we seek to be open to the leading of his Spirit in serving him in this place, there may be no one who can say that in their hunger they come to the church and were given a stone, and not bread. Amen.

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