

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

CHOSEN

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Psalm 118:19-29

1Peter 2:4-10

Last week we saw Jesus telling Peter to care for his sheep and to feed his lambs. This week, and through this month, we will see how Peter did that, not in his life story, which we can find parts of in the book of Acts, but in his writing. Peter was never to forget that Jesus' last instruction to him was "Follow me." And he thought long and hard about what that meant, while he did his best to spread the word about his master. This letter, written to Jewish Christian exiles living scattered in Asia Minor, sums up a lot of what Peter had found that "Follow me" means. As we read portions of his letter, we will see that he is not concerned about the daily mission of the church; he assumes that Christians will be bearing witness to Jesus in word and in deed and simply in their bearing in the world. But he is concerned that the Christians should have realised what "Follow me" means in terms of how others will see them and react to them.

One of the differences between the very early church, the community of Christians that Peter wrote for and cared for, and what the church was to become in Europe and from there in many other lands, was the perceived status of Christians, including Christian leaders. We are used to thinking of the church as having influence and a bit of power. In mediaeval times and before, the power of the church was just about limitless, and, sadly, naturally, was often abused (though maybe history has remembered the abuses of power more vividly than it has or can remember the way that the church used its power for good). The Reformation was the church calling its own power into question, questions having been already raised by those who were not within that powerful structure. Although the power of the church has waned, in worldly terms in the last 500 years, and perhaps especially in the past 70 years, we still have Church of England bishops in the House of Lords, the Lords Spiritual, as they are known. When the Pope speaks, it is still a matter for international news media to report. And even in Scotland we expect that something will reach the outside world of what is discussed at the General Assembly, coming up in a couple of weeks - even if it is usually not what we would want reported. The church, for better or for worse is still an institution that wields some influence. Maybe not always the kind that it should.

But in Peter's day, things were very different. He was talking to people who were a tiny group within society. He was talking to people who were completely without power, in many cases completely at the mercy of others in their daily lives. Later we will see him addressing slaves in particular, because a significant proportion of the small number of believers came from that caste of society. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he told them to consider how very few of them were of notable birth or rich or influential in the eyes of the world, and Peter's readers were no different. They were not a people, they were nothing.

Or were they? Peter is writing to people who know that they are nothing, who live with the rejection of the world, and first of all he wants them to know that this very rejection marks them out as followers of Jesus. It is not that all who are rejected are good Christians, but as Christians we follow Jesus, and we should reflect and remember that Jesus was misunderstood and then rejected, especially by those who had worldly power, which, ironically included the religious leaders. If we are to follow him in bringing God's love into the world, then rejection may be a not unexpected side effect of our actions. These Christians, who were in many cases the lowest of the low before they had faith, have in some eyes become even lower yet, the lowest of the lowest of the low.

Yes, says Peter, that will happen. People who don't understand trip over the rock that is Jesus, and cannot see how really he holds everything together as the key-stone, the cornerstone. And if we are called to follow Jesus, sometimes they will also trip over us, and throw us aside. When I was digging the garden recently to plant potatoes, I wondered aloud how there could be just as many stones in the earth this year as last, when I pulled out so many then, and so many the year before, too. I was digging out the stones, I didn't stop to consider them, though I noticed, in passing that some were large and some were coloured and some were lumps of old tarmac. But the stones weren't what I was thinking about, I was thinking about good soil for my crop. In the same way people who are not thinking about what is important to us, people who are not thinking about following God, or living to please him, will not find us, or, more importantly, Jesus relevant to them and will toss us and him aside. Rejection. Christians should never be surprised by it, though that doesn't make it easier to deal with.

So, Peter's readers were, by and large, nothing, and they knew they were nothing and they were treated like nothing. And that is more or less where we, as church people, as Christians, and followers of Jesus are too, and, if we are heeding that call to "Follow me" it is where we should expect to be, because Jesus was seen and treated as nothing, especially by those who thought that they were something.

But, says Peter, we know that Jesus is not nothing. He is the very opposite of nothing. He may be the stone which then builders rejected, but we know that he has become the cornerstone, the essential person in God's salvation of the world. He holds together the old covenant and the new, he holds together heaven and earth, the realm of God and the world of time, as the living stone. And he lifts us up to all become living stones, like him.

Because if we heed that call to "Follow me" then we too are living stones and we too are not nothing, not no people, but we really are people, real people, people as God intended them to be. We are in tune with God, companioned by God and eternal, not transient. Once, we were no people, nothing, - and it may still look that way to the world, who sees only what it wants to see. But now, now, because of Jesus Christ, the living stone, because he was rejected, because he was faithful to who he was called to be, because he has opened up the way for us to be restored to what God intended us to be – now we are God's people. God's people. Now that is really something!

Once, says Peter, we had not received mercy. Life with no mercy, a world with no mercy is a bleak place, with no hope; a place which promotes the struggle to climb up even at the expense of others; a place where people can be treated as though they are nothing and nobody. Once we had not received mercy. But now we have.

Now we know God's mercy. It is God's mercy, which is not giving us what we deserve, which gives us Christ, and which makes us his people. God's mercy which lifts us up, and, as Peter also says, it is God's mercy which chooses us.

Everyone wants to be chosen. You remember what it was like at school in playground games or in more formal P.E. lessons when teams – for rounders, or football, or whatever had to be chosen. You remember that feeling of “what if no one chooses me?” Or maybe you don't. Maybe you were always the one chosen first or the one who assumed the right to choose. But most of us knew that little fear that no one would want us. That has been the fear that God's people have lived with till now – the fear, the threat even, that God would reject them. But in Jesus we are chosen. You are chosen. And you are chosen by God.

We are those who have heard the call of Jesus to “Follow me” and we are trying to follow. And we have to realise that this means that we follow, not just in how we try to live our lives, bringing God's love to those around us in word and deed; it also means that we follow when the world's reaction to us is similar to how the world reacted to Jesus. I have heard this called living cruciform. We accept the putting down and the pains of life, and we do more, we seek to bear the pains of others, as Jesus did. And it can make us feel a bit weak and a bit nothing, and a bit like what is the point. Peter knew that, and so did his first readers.

But here we are, not a large group of people, many of us getting on in years, and when we get on in years it can seem that we are no longer seen by the world, or the government, or society. Here we are, and few of us are important beyond our own family circles, and many of us have families who wonder openly why we bother with faith and with God. And it could seem very dismal. But here before me are people, and a church of people who are chosen by God. God has seen and God has laid his hand on you, each of you and said, “I choose you, I choose you first.” (Because God is God he can choose everyone first, no one is second best.) Here we are, and I see before me people who have received God's mercy and have become God's own people. Here before me is a royal priesthood, who, by faithfully coming to God themselves can bring with them in their prayers the whole world, even though it despise and mock us. Nothing? Oh, I don't think so. In God's eyes you are really something, a building made of living stones, each chosen and placed to bring God the glory.

So, if you feel discouraged this week, if you feel that you don't count or no one cares, well, quite simply, you are wrong. Remember that you are chosen and loved and redeemed; that you have received God's mercy in Jesus and that you are made to be like Jesus: you are the people of God. Amen.