



The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
26 April 2015

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## **The Stone that the Builders Rejected**

**A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells**

**Readings: Acts 4.5-12; 1 John 3.16-end; John 10.11-18**

As I child I used to love going to the beach. Growing up in the West Country we had the unparalleled splendours of Weston-Super-Mare just an hour away. But if there wasn't a sandy beach available, I wasn't disheartened. Because that meant I could spend a half hour sorting through pebbles to find which ones looked like they would skim well. I would pick up a handful of stones, and sift through them tossing most of them aside until I found one that was worthy of being hurled, flat-side-down, into the incoming tide.

It's something we do all the time. At the supermarket, we survey the apples or peaches or bananas and choose the ones with no bruises. On TV we enjoy shows where a person with talent is selected while their rivals slink into the corner, their hopes shattered. Any craftsperson will examine numerous paintbrushes, or pieces of wood, or images, before settling on the one to work on, and setting aside the rest.

What's it like to be those ones that are rejected? What's it like to be that apple that's tossed away, that piece of wood that's useless, that stone that the builders decide to set aside? I'm guessing you know exactly what it feels like. Why? Because St Martin-in-the-Fields has a reputation for having an ever-open door to those who've been rejected: and a community that's well known for putting the rejected at its heart is likely to assemble around it a bunch of people who identify with those feelings of rejection, even if their life circumstances superficially seem that little bit more secure. My suspicion is pretty much everyone here today feels in some significant way like an outsider, either because you know exactly what it feels like to be told you're not wanted somewhere or because you're carrying a secret that, if revealed, could, you fear, produce the same effect.

Stay with that feeling of rejection for a moment, if it's not too painful. Rejection keys into our profound feelings of unworthiness, of being useless, peripheral, no more than a passenger in a world full of drivers. It makes us feel stupid, ugly, and unlovable. It digs into a place that suggests, 'This would all be much better without me.' Either you fight the rejection and risk being seen as a person who just doesn't get it, or you accept the rejection and assume the identity of someone whom the world would be better off without.

I worked in a community for several years where one of the leaders once said to me, 'You know, we're a bunch of misfits who somehow fit together.' What he was recognising was that, rather than rebelling against feelings of rejection, we'd found if we worked constructively with them we could become something rather beautiful. And that's something we've discovered at St Martin-in-the-Fields. We sometimes use the word inclusion but inclusion isn't really the right word. It isn't the right word because it suggests there are a bunch of people in the centre whose lives are normal and sorted and privileged, and they should jolly well open the doors and welcome people in and be a bit more thoughtful and kind and generous. The problem with this is that it's such a patronising and paternalistic model. When the community leader said, 'We're a bunch of misfits who somehow fit together,' he wasn't regarding himself as normal and secure and somehow above it all: he was one of the misfits too. He was reframing the whole idea that there was a centre and a periphery, where the centre gave kindly hospitality to the periphery, because the cost of that idea is that the periphery feels humiliated and the centre feels smug.

What we've discovered at St Martin's is that if you're looking for a cornerstone, the best place to look is among the stones that the builders have rejected. Not long ago we hosted an evening on

dementia and faith, and what electrified the evening was when a person with dementia and a person caring for a loved one with dementia each spoke with wisdom, courage, and truth. Those with dementia must be among the most rejected in our society, but that night it was brilliantly obvious that the Holy Spirit was speaking through them. For some time now St Martin's has hosted events surrounding disability and faith. One event began with a person with autism describing in unforgettable detail what it would have felt like for a person like him to be present in the crowd at the first Palm Sunday, and how the sensory overload would have done his head in. No one listening could ever see all the hosannas and palm branches in such an innocent way again. A year ago St Martin's hosted an event for single people, in which participants explored the advantages and disappointments, sadness and opportunity of being voluntarily or involuntarily single. Again it was a discovery of solidarity, wisdom, and hope. Nine months ago St Martin's hosted an event for those fleeing oppressive societies on account of their sexual identity. These were stones the builders had rejected if you ever saw them: but coming together in the company of others who'd been rejected in different ways they could find inspiration and purpose beyond fear and escape.

When Peter stood before the Sanhedrin, called to account for how he had enabled a crippled beggar to walk, he looks back into Israel's story, in which God had founded the kingdom not on any of Jesse's tall and powerful sons, but on David, the youngest and weakest. Peter quotes Psalm 118 which describes the choosing of David with the words, 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' And Peter identifies that rejected stone as Jesus. In his crucifixion he was rejected by the builders – yet in his resurrection he became the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life.

Think for a moment about the way the Church of England sees itself. It's built churches all around the country that mostly look like centres of power and authority. It's extended hospitality in a sometimes clumsy but mostly generous-hearted desire to welcome the misfit and the stranger. But it feels it's losing its grip on the country. I wonder whether that's because the critical mass of the sorted and normal no longer assumes church is part of what it means to be sorted and normal – or whether the whole idea of a sorted and normal centre was profoundly flawed all along. It could well be that fewer people attend church services. But a whole lot more people are belonging to support groups for parents of Down Syndrome children or relatives of those killed in road traffic accidents. And when you attend such gatherings they sometimes feel a good deal more engaged, alive, and focused than a lot of church services. What I saw at the evening on dementia and faith was something that felt like the renewal of the church. It felt like the church was finding a new cornerstone – a cornerstone made up of stones that the builders had rejected.

The recently released film *Pride* tells the true story of a group of lesbian and gay activists in London in 1984. They realise that the way society, media and government despise them is equivalent to the way the same forces think about the miners, who are in the midst of their titanic struggle with the Thatcher government. The lesbian and gay activists get it into their heads to reach out to a depressed mining village in South Wales. The film shows how with patience and forgiveness, grace and solidarity, and a lot of courage and resilience, prejudices on both sides are gradually broken down and an amazing alliance grows up. The film ends with coachloads of miners coming unanticipated to join the 1985 Gay Pride march in London. It's an astonishing turnaround. Together these two groups of stones that the builders have rejected set aside bitterness and self-pity and find they've become one another's cornerstone. A bunch of misfits somehow, beautifully, movingly, somehow fit together. It's an icon of what church can be; what church should be.

The church is down in the dumps because it thinks it needs to be full of big and strong and powerful people. But Jesus was the stone the builders rejected; and in his ministry he surrounded himself with stones that the builders had rejected. Jesus didn't found the church on the so-called centre – the sorted, the normal, the benevolent and condescending. Jesus assumed the church would always need the work of the Holy Spirit – the work or miracle, of subversion, of turning the world upside-down. Nothing has changed – except for a lot of the intervening years the church has forgotten who Jesus was and whose company he kept.

We're not talking about a bland and affirming insight that a lot of people who've been overlooked in life turn out to have some important things to contribute. That's true, but what Peter sees in Acts chapter 4 is much more radical than that. The stone that the builders rejected didn't find a place in the wall somewhere by being thoughtfully included like a last-minute addition to a family photo. The rejected stone became the cornerstone, the keystone – the stone that held up all the others, the crucial link, the vital connection. That's what ministry's all about – not condescendingly making welcome alienated strangers, but seeking out the rejected *precisely because they are the energy and the life-force that will transform us all*. Every pastor, every missionary, every evangelist, every disciple should have these words over their desk, their windscreen, on their screensaver, in the photo section of their wallet, wherever they see it all the time – the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. *If you're looking for where the future church is coming from, look at what the church and society has so blithely rejected*. The life of the church is about constantly recognising the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating the grace that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives.

Once there was a struggling young Christian who felt she couldn't share the truth about who she was and avoided intimacy with anyone she met in the church because she assumed straightaway that she would meet with rejection and exclusion. Eventually she found the courage to open her heart to a gentle companion, who simply said, 'What you have told me is that you are a human being. I see that as cause for compassion, not for condemnation.' Those words changed her life. From that moment on the young Christian found a freedom she'd never known, and resolved to spend her life having the liberating effect on others that her companion's wisdom had had on her. She realised that there was something deeper than that others had rejected her. What was really going on was that she'd rejected herself – or at least a part of her that was a source of life and growth and hope. She'd been the builder that had rejected the stone. In devoting her life to liberating others who had known similar rejection, she turned the stone that she had rejected into the cornerstone.

I wonder what part of yourself you've rejected. I wonder whether, like that young woman, that part of you could become the cornerstone of your life, your faith, your ministry to others. I wonder who you've rejected, and whether one day you'll come to see that person for who they really are, and see the gift they are to you. On the night before he died Peter rejected Jesus. He denied him three times. Jesus was the stone Peter rejected. But Peter became the stone, the rock on which the church was founded, and Jesus, the rejected one, became the keystone. See Jesus in the face of the one you have rejected. And let the Jesus you discover in them become your cornerstone.