ON THIS ROCK

Acts 7: 55-60

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2: 2-10

John 14: 1-14

Among the many useful skills I have failed to acquire over my life is the skill of house construction. If I or people of my ilk had been put in charge of sheltering the human race, we would all still be living in caves. As far as I can tell, buildings are built by wizards and operate according to the rules of magic. How doors happen to connect rooms, how windows appear in exterior walls, how flights of stairs manage to support the weight of people going up and down...these things are all deeply mysterious to me.

So when I looked up the lectionary readings for this fifth Sunday of Easter, and saw that our passage from First Peter quotes one of the lines from Psalm 118 - The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone - I was struck by the realization that, although I've quoted the verse many times - even usually citing it as part of our opening word of welcome here on Sunday mornings - nonetheless I wasn't particularly clear about exactly what a cornerstone was, or more specifically, I wasn’t clear about what special qualities made a stone suitable for being a good cornerstone. So I looked it up.

What I found was very straightforward, and probably everyone here already knew it. The cornerstone of a building is the stone that lies at the bottom of the corner where two walls come together, and what makes it different from all other building stones is that it is the final stone of both walls, or thinking of it another way, it is the initial stone of two walls. So what makes a stone suitable to be a cornerstone is that it be square, so that one wall will go off from the other at a 90 degree angle.

*Ingenious,* I thought, as I mastered a fact that should have been blindingly obvious. *Now maybe I’ll tackle plumbing.*

But once I had that fact in hand - or in mind - the verse itself began to draw me in a little deeper than I had gone before. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." I thought, how could that be? After all, if the builders rejected a stone, it had to have been because it wasn't perfectly square enough; so how could it now be suitable to be the cornerstone for some other building?

Obviously the answer is that it's a poetic image, and the Psalmist originally, and Peter in quoting the Psalmist, had something else in mind in using the image, that the point to focus on is not that something or someone has the proper qualities to be suitable for a variety of different buildings; but rather that something or someone was unsuitable for one sort of building , but perfect for another, different sort of building.

But then we're led to ask: Who or what might that be?

The usual answer you hear in church, of course, is that the reference is to Jesus Christ. On this view, the Psalmist in Psalm 118 is speaking prophetically, and Peter in his letter is speaking literally, about the rejection of Jesus by His own people, the Jews, and then becoming the founder of a new Israel, the Church Universal, of Christianity.

And of course, that **is** what happened. J esus was rejected, crucified, in fact, and did indeed then become the basis, the foundation, the support of a new spiritual edifice that we call the Church, with a capital ‘C’, or sometimes the Universal Church..

But I believe that both the Psalmist and Peter himself are pointing to something even deeper than that, something that is in truth the very cornerstone of every Christian life, as well as the life of the Church . What is that? It's the subject of our Gospel reading for today.

So let's turn to John 14: 1-14.

"Believe in God. Believe in the same way in me," Jesus says. "Put your faith in me."

Whatever its prophetic significance may have been, Psalm 118 was written as a psalm about King David. It may even have been written by him, but it was certainly written about him. If you read the entire psalm, it's a song of praise and gratitude to God for granting victory to Israel over its enemies because of Israel's trust in God to defend them. In other words, it's a song celebrating faith.

David himself, after all, was a product of faith. We all know the story of David and Goliath, how the giant Philistine warrior was intimidating and demoralizing the entire army of Israel, until a young shepherd boy, not even a soldier, came along. He persuades King Saul - the man David would many years later replace as King - he persuades Saul to let him go out and represent all of Israel: a young boy who can't even wear armour because it's too heavy, who has no shield, no blade, no experience, nothing but a slingshot. And of course David succeeded.

Those who preach this episode normally focus on David, his courage, his resourcefulness, his self-assurance. But I would argue that the true hero here is King Saul. It was Saul, after all, who ventured everything he had, his own life and the existence of his entire country, against impossible odds. He gambled it all on one young inexperienced boy, going up against a giant, ferocious, heavily armed, renowned warrior. This is true faith, the faith that outweighs or runs contrary to all rational consideration.

And so when we come to the tremendous line in the Psalm - "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" - the stone the Psalmist has in mind, I believe, is the faith of Israel, the faith of Saul that gave them David in the beginning, and gave them the many and great victories of David that the psalm celebrates. The faith of Israel had deteriorated into a reliance on themselves, a faith in their own abilities and power, and that had led to disaster. But the faith in God that the nation had lost had been restored at last in the person of David, and given them now fresh and hopefully final victories.

And that, I believe, is also what Peter is referencing in his own letter. What is rejected by the world is precisely what lies at the foundation of the Christian world, and what holds that world together. Faith. The Christian faith cannot function in the non-Christian world, it is of no effect, it is not meant for this world, because this world demands straight lines and perfect squares. This world rejects the impossible, the tremendous, the supernatural. This world is the world of cold dead stone and arithmetic and things the human intellect can grasp, things we can wrap our minds around, to use the colloquialism.. Faith cannot function there, it is not needed there, it is not wanted there. It is rejected there. This world has intellect instead, self-reliance instead, trust in the law, instead.

At the central turning point of Christ’s ministry, Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him, and they answer they say he is like this one or the second coming of that one, naming several historical individuals. And then Jesus asks them: *“But you? Who do you say I am?”* And Peter answers: “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” And the essence of what Peter is affirming is: “You are the impossible one. You are what cannot be.” And Jesus singles out **that** belief and says in effect, “That’s it. That faith, that impossible belief in me, that’s the cornerstone. *And on this rock I will build my church*.”

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. That which doesn't conform to measurement, that which doesn't rely on equation, that which is grounded in mystery, all that is rejected by the world. Yet that is the cornerstone of who we are as Christians.

I believe that's why the Christian building is so ungainly, why there's so much diversity it in, so much confusion, yes, even so much contradiction. That's why it wobbles and loses tiles from the roof in a storm, why tenants often abandon their apartments in it. Because by worldly standards, it's unstable. Its cornerstone is unsuitable by worldly standards, unsuitable for worldly purposes like making money or gaining power or adapting itself to unrighteousness.

And I believe that’s why our rational, law-governed, intellect-led, square-cornered world, so reasonable, so rational, so proud of its achievements…I believe that’s why this world still finds itself overflowing with hatred and distrust and war, each century exceeding the prior in the enormity of its violence, a “progress” almost certain to contine in this, the twenty-first.

The rock the builders rejected is faith. Faith in what? In the living Christ. Stephan as he walked to his death, looked up and what he saw was Jesus alive. When Paul was unhorsed on the road to Damascus, it was the living Jesus who spoke to him. The rock that the builders rejected, the rock that is both the beginning and the end of the walls that hold our lives as Christians together, that rock is the belief in the living Christ. It is the belief and trust in the Christ that lives in heaven, but much more importantly, in the Christ who lives in each one of us.

And so it remains to this day. As we approach Pentecost, it is vital to realize and remember that there is no Christian life without the acknowledgment and acceptance of the indwelt spirit of the still living Christ as our Lord and Savior. That is the cornerstone, without which the building cannot stand.

And so, Heavenly God, as we draw to the close of the Easter season, our prayer for this morning is for a fresh outpouring on us all and on the whole world of the grace of faith in your Son, the living glorified Jesus, who indwells and sustains all those who open their hearts to receive Him as their Lord and Savior, and who offer all prayers, and this one, too, in his precious name. Amen.