

3rd May, 2015.

Reading: Genesis 28: 10 - 22

1 Peter 2: 1 – 8

Sermon: The Symbolism of Stones

The theme this year at the Church's Heart And Soul Event in Princes Street Gardens on the Sunday of the General Assembly is 'Living Stones'. The Church of Scotland will be celebrating what it means to be living stones of faith in our communities and in the wider world.

Various congregations from across Scotland, some Presbyteries and a variety of organisations and committees of the Church of Scotland will have displays in the gardens through which they will share their stories and demonstrate the vital part that they play, not only in sharing their faith but in supporting and serving the communities in which they live and work. They will be demonstrating what it means to be 'living stones'.

There are quite a few references to stones in the Bible. In the Book of Genesis, we have story of Jacob with the help of his mother, Rebekah, cheating his brother, Esau out of his inheritance. Having deceived his father, Jacob, leaves the family home and heads to Haran.

As the sun sets, he decides to lie down and sleep. It was on a stone that Jacob laid his head and fell asleep. Jacob wasn't looking for God when he lay down. He wasn't looking for forgiveness or acceptance but in his dreams, God came to Him. Not only did God come to Him, God

assured Him of His presence with him wherever He went. In addition, God said that He would bless Jacob and His descendants with land, a sign of God's forgiveness and acceptance of Jacob despite his cheating and his envy of his brother.

But what about the stone on which he rested his head. Was the stone in that story particularly significant? Well, yes, but maybe only in as much as it shows us that when we are in a hard place, God comes to us. God is there with us, never to leave us or forsake us. We don't need to go looking for Him. He comes looking for us even when we don't expect it to happen or deserve it.

Is there not a great comfort in that? At times, in those hard places, we don't have the energy to approach God. At times, in those hard places, we don't even think of approaching God. Jacob didn't. At times, in those hard places, we feel as if we have lost sight of God. Jacob wasn't thinking along those lines but what we see in that story is that even when we lose sight of God, God never loses sight of us. We may lose our grip of God, but God never loses His grip of us.

Jacob was in a hard place but maybe it's easier for God to reach us in those instances because we have none of the everyday comforts which can leave us, at times, feeling quite self-sufficient. When we have everything we want, we often don't see a need for God which is perhaps one of the reasons our Churches are so low in numbers. As a nation, maybe we are too comfortable, too well off in

comparison to the places in the world where the Church is growing despite hardship and despite persecution.

Isn't it the case that when everything is ripped away and we are in that hard place, that place of vulnerability, isn't it the case that we may have time then to notice God's presence with us? It wasn't that God wasn't with Jacob before but he never noticed.

Derek Browning, minister of Morningside Parish Church makes the point on the Church of Scotland website that it is perhaps in the vulnerability of sleep that God makes His message clear to Jacob because he is not distracted by the cares and the concerns and the complexities of every day life. We are sometimes like Jacob, but whatever our situation, whether it is in the vulnerability of sleep or in that hard place, God comes to us and makes His presence known to us.

There are other references to stones in the Bible. In the Gospels, there was the stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb. That stone was a stone which Derek Browning describes as a stone to block out daylight and air, a stone to hide death and end hope.

In complete contrast to that hard rock of defeat, we have the image of the stone rolled away, revealing an empty tomb, a tomb full of mystery and questions, and even although it wasn't realised at the time, a tomb filled with hope and promise.

In a tomb carved out near the Damascus Gate, a tomb which is thought to be representative of a tomb from the first century, there is apparently a stone headrest on

which, it is believed, the head of the deceased would have been laid. However, as Derek Browning writes, the dreams and possibilities of the Christian faith, of the resurrection faith, have no need of a stone headrest. The dreams and possibilities of our faith take place outside the tomb in the world of the living.

The stone headrest and the stone at the door of the tomb are not the final word on the moving stairway of God's involvement with the world.

In the nativity, God came to us, as He came to Jacob, but in a much more visible form and as part of creation. He came to us, not in a dream but in real time. In the resurrection, God came back to us again. God's story does not end with a tombstone.

Jesus is described in 1 Peter as being the cornerstone of our faith, **a living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious**. A living stone, a cornerstone, creates an image of someone on whom we can build our lives, as indeed is intended. Faith in this living stone will not disappoint. **He who believes in Him**, we are told, **will not be put to shame**.

'Living stones' is an incredibly powerful image of faith. For a building to have strength, for a building to provide shelter, for a building to remain sound, it needs its stones to be in place, secured in place, and it needs its stones to be connected to each other. Living stones are the material with which the Kingdom of God is built, with Christ as the cornerstone. As the hymn says:

Christ is made the sure foundation,

Christ the head and cornerstone,
chosen of the Lord and precious,
binding all the Church in one.

Jesus is the cement which holds us together. Without Jesus, our house of faith, not our building, but the living stones which are the people of God will crumble and fall away. The smallest gap renders the building of living stones incomplete and potentially vulnerable.

At the Annual Stated Meeting, we heard the reading from 1 Corinthians which speaks of every part of the body as being important for the body to function properly. Every person who comes through our doors is part of that body, one of the living stones, and we cannot reject any of them, no matter how many other living stones we have. All of them are precious and without each other, we are potentially vulnerable.

Derek Browning poses a question. He asks what the Church would be like if we invested as much time, effort, care and attention to the living stones of its people as we do to the bricks and mortar of its sanctuaries.

There is a clear benefit to investing in both, but it may often seem easier to have strategies about heating and stone-pointing and roof maintenance, and even the renovation our hall than it is to have strategies which educate, stimulate and include the living stone people who come through our Church doors or our hall doors.

As Derek Browning rightly points out, God's kingdom, is a construction site. Many of the living stones rest on hard stones and we do not know at first glance which ones

they are. We can reject none. God came to Jacob in that hard place and as His body, we need to reach out in the same way and get alongside each one of the living stones that enters or stumbles into our community of faith soon whatever day of the week.

Jacob, having experienced God in that hard place said: "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." I wonder how many of the people who stumble through our doors go away with that thought.

Jacob wasn't in a Church building. He was in the middle of nowhere in a hard place. By the time he woke, having had an encounter with God, his comment was: **How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.**

We are the living stones of God's house. We are the living stones of faith. How many come in here and meet us and go away thinking: **This is the gate of heaven?**

We have a responsibility to the people of God, to the people of our parish, to be living stones. All of the stones will be a bit battered but we are chosen by God and used by Him as the gate to heaven. We are the living stones of that stairway to heaven. We have a responsibility to demonstrate to our parish what that means so that everyone with whom we have contact knows that God is in this place and that God will never leave them or us, even in the hard places.