

What is the church? What is St. Martin's? Why do we come to church each week? What is this thing that we are constantly called to be a part of and to find our place within? Is it just an old building, a beautiful heritage site? Or is it a family of people? Is it a community network for friendship and relationships?

In the ordination services of the Church of England it says, "The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God's love and to work for the coming of his Kingdom." So the Church is the people of God, not the building!

As we reflect on our text from 1 Peter 2 rather than taking it apart verse by verse or even looking at each metaphor in turn, I'd like to look at several themes that run throughout the passage each of them relating to our identity as a "People of God". The first thing I'd like you to notice is that we are a people who have been... chosen. But chosen for what purpose?

Verse four tells us to come to him, "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight". What a wonderful privilege that we can come at any time, indeed we are invited to come all the time.

Then in verse five we are chosen to be living stones, "and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood". These are no ordinary stones just gathered up, these are stones cut into shape to be used as building materials. What we must ask ourselves is, "Am I willing to be shaped and used as a living stone for God's purposes?" Too many Christians seem to want to be the whole temple or to take Christ's place as the cornerstone. Verse five also tells us we are chosen to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Not only we are living stones, as we form the spiritual temple in which God lives, we are also priests who serve God and offer him spiritual sacrifices. The Old Testament priests offered animal sacrifices in the temple; God's people offer sacrifices too, but these are "spiritual sacrifices." What comprises these spiritual sacrifices? The answer is found in other New Testament letters:

- Romans 12:1, we offer ourselves and our wills to God's control.
- Ephesians 5:2, we offer love, to God and to others.
- Philippians 4:18, we offer our money and possessions freely to help spread the gospel.
- Hebrews 13:15, we centre our lives around continual praise to God.

- Hebrews 13:16, we do good and share freely with others.

So our 'spiritual worship' as Christians has a definite social justice agenda: we don't just come to church on a Sunday or Friday or whenever and sing hymns and pray prayers and believe that this is the sum total of our worship. Instead, we offer ourselves, our whole lives, our life as church, as an act of spiritual worship as we engage with social justice agendas and work to alleviate poverty and improve the lot of the marginalised and vulnerable. That is our spiritual worship.

Not only are we chosen but we are "a royal priesthood". Here, Peter is implying that all believers are ordained with the role of a royal priesthood, reconciling God in Christ to many nations. This means that we are set apart for Christ and have access to God, and this access is not only for ourselves, but also for others. Fulfilling the role of a royal priest is not easy to do. But God will never ask us to do anything for which he does not equip us. Participating in the role of a royal priest literally means to do "acts of praise, acts of kindness, sharing goods, acceptable conduct, and proclamation of the gospel".

We are a holy nation! This phrase refers back to God's covenant at Mt. Sinai which made ancient Israel into a holy nation by the blood of a sacrifice. Now God has established a new covenant with Christ, his sacrifice has paved the way for all believers to be classified as holy before God. Collectively, we are a holy nation, just as Israel was in the past. This is a team effort. There is a story in Nehemiah 3, which you may not be familiar with. In this passage, 46 different people are mentioned who took the lead to build a section of the wall of Jerusalem that was destroyed when Israel was taken into exile. Each group worked together with their family and friends to do a small part. But together, those 46 groups did an amazing thing. Imagine how long it would have taken for Nehemiah to try to build the wall on his own. He probably would have never succeeded. As believers who work together, we can do much more for the kingdom of God than someone who does their own thing.

Finally, we are God's special possession, "in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." We are called to "declare" who God is and what he has done, specifically the act of salvation. We proclaim him by

- conducting our lives so that they reveal his character, and
- telling others of the salvation he accomplished for us and of his work in our lives.

Since Peter's audience was under close watch due to the laws against pushing religious practices on the colonists. Peter had to think of a more laid back style of witnessing. Lifestyle Evangelism! Peter said, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Notice Peter did not say, get in their face and preach the whole bible every chance you get, but he said to wait for them to come to you and when they do be ready to present the gospel.

Simon, Bishop of Tonbridge, writes, "Being a leader in the Church of God is a high calling and a hard one at times. The risk is that we allow the deeply individualistic, success driven ethic in wider society to govern how we view our ministry. This can make people downhearted and does little to offer a counter-cultural perspective to others who need it. We owe one another encouragement and inspiration." As we go from here today, I pray that the Holy Spirit will work within us to become that chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. In Jesus' name. Amen.