

St Peter's, Ealing

Sunday 12th July 2015

Dedication Festival ~ Genesis 28.11-18; 1 Peter 2.1-10; John 10.22-29 (YrB)

God's own people.

Story is a powerful medium, especially when used to help us understand the nature of life and our relationship with God. As you know, scripture is full of story. I should be clear; when I say 'story' I don't mean fairy tale or fiction, although many stories in scripture are heavily edited or redacted with much allegory and metaphor often used as tools to extract meaning. We wouldn't want to argue for example that Adam and Eve are historical figures like Lord Nelson or Queen Elizabeth. But there is more to scriptural stories than just the creations of the human imagination.

I love this story we have in our reading from Genesis today. Jacob is fleeing his brother Esau from whom he has stolen Esau's birth right and his father Isaac's blessing and is heading to the home of his relative Laban, from whom he will eventually acquire wives and wealth, before returning to his home land and the forgiving arms of his brother. It is a family story of twin-hood rivalry, one-up-manship and reconciliation. It is also an integral part of the story of God's developing relationship with his people and the establishment of the nation of Israel. A story that will eventually lead to the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of the world – but I get ahead of myself.

Biblical scholars will tell you this particular episode in Jacob's story has folklore accretions; things like the angels ascending and descending, probably on an incline rather than an actual ladder and redacted elements such as the use of the stone and it's anointing which have been used to symbolise the connectivity between heaven and earth, as well as the holiness of the place Jacob finds himself in, which he re-names Bethel. The key though to this episode is the covenant Jacob makes with God and the engagement of God with this founding father of what will be God's people. Unfortunately, the passage we have today cuts short the story. Following on Jacob makes a covenant with God that asks he be kept safe and allowed to return home one day. If God allows this Jacob will place God at the centre of his life and Jacob dedicates this place he finds himself in as God's house. This we know as the promise includes a tithe of all Jacobs' possession that will be used to create cultic community; but again I get a head of myself.

We may not initially see a story in our passage from the First letter of Peter but there is one. The author, probably not Peter himself, is writing to a community who are experiencing difficulty; it may be rejection by the local populace, it may be actual persecution. We do know they are a varied group who have been rejected and are wondering where their God is. The author of the epistle likens them to the Living Stone that was rejected by humanity, Christ, God's chosen Son. The writer calls his audience to own their status as living stones, drawn together as a temple, a living witness to the God they worship; to accept with honour that they like Jesus are rejected but are accepted wholly and completely by God. This ownership, this reception of their honourable status before God has consequences. Through this they are called to be a holy priesthood, a people whose lives have been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. So the writer exhorts them "rid yourselves of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy and all slander"; in other words drive away all those things that destroy community and prevent the church from being the body of Christ, from being living stones.

The writer asks this beleaguered community to become like infants again, to start a fresh and begin again in this honourable state as the people of God. Like many church communities this community is struggling; our writer encourages this community and through them us, to continue in their resolve to be living stones, to be the body of Christ, even when the world around seems difficult and intimidating. If the Living Stone is part of you and is the centre of your life then you can be changed and you can be built into something new and something that witnesses to God in the world – a living spiritual temple built to God's glory.

A dedication festival in any community is about celebrating that community's story; celebrating all those who have gone before, celebrating the day on which stones were laid and living stones gathered to begin the witness of the living spiritual temple that is the people of God who gather in worship and praise. So today we give thanks for the establishment of this living, spiritual temple of St Peter's. Of course we give thanks for this beautiful building that stands as a testament to the faith of past generations as well as the faithfulness of those who gather here now. It is a testament to the place of God in our community today and proclaims our relationship with God, our story with God and where we are in that story. It is our anointed stone.

In St Peter's, as with many other worshipping communities, that story is at present about being under pressure. As I wrote and reflected on this sermon I wondered if we are rather like that community of the First letter of Peter. And this week we have received the sad news of the passing of one of our longest serving members in the death of David Sladen; a member here since he moved into Daver Court as a young boy in 1938. Yet our story continues and the words of Peter and Jacob and all the faithful who have been part of our journey continue to guide and inspire us in our story. We are those living stones – maybe we are rejected by humanity even – but we continue to witness to the love of God revealed to us in the scriptures and made clear in the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ; a love that we share as we adhere to the words of scripture – being free of malice, guile, envy and slander, being sincere and honest, open and generous in all we do, and say and give; that divine love we receive as we gather around the altar, the table of God to share in God's holy meal of broken bread and wine out poured; the body and blood of Jesus Christ, Our Saviour.

As we continue to do this, to be the living temple, holy and acceptable to God, members will come and go, life will continue to unfold; pressure on our community and our finances will challenge us but we will continue to be that holy priesthood, proclaiming the love of God in this place, continuing God's ministry of love, redemption and action, being living stones of faith and truth. Then we will be and will encourage others to be those sheep cared for but the one true shepherd. Jesus Christ, the Living Stone.