
Under Construction

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 7 May 2023

Acts 7:55-60 • 1 Peter 2:2-10 • John 14:1-14



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

“Like living stones, let yourself be built into a spiritual house.” These words from 1 Peter speak to us of how we receive the Good News of salvation. The living stone image is based on several Bible passages, from Isaiah, from the Psalms, and from the Gospels. In Matthew, Jesus says:

Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?
(Matt 21:42)

Jesus is the cornerstone, upon which the church, and the whole foundation of our faith, is built. He is the centre, the focus, the point where all of creation comes together and rejoices. He is the living stone, for Christ is alive and lives today. And we too are living stones, created in God’s image. From the cornerstone, a building is raised; and from Christ, we are raised and built into temples of our Lord.

What does it mean to be built into a spiritual house, or a temple? I am reminded of the Rev'd Helen Roud's sermon at my induction here, when she related C. S. Lewis' words about God rebuilding the house, the house that is actually us:

He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself. — *C. S. Lewis*

God begins to rebuild us as soon as we answer his call and accept Jesus in our lives. That's an interesting thought, isn't it? We are created by God, but we are not finished at our birth. We are only begun, and the Master Builder still has work to do on us. We can choose to remain as we are, or we can choose to change. And if we choose to change, we can either let ourselves become total ruins, through careless living, bad habits, cruelty to others, avoiding responsibility, rejecting God — or we can make Christ our model and allow God to build us up into something really special: true children of God, walking in his ways and recognising his love and his authority in all things. We begin just as cornerstones, but we finish up as palaces, and God resides within us. And that is just the beginning, for if we allow God to do so, he will make us worthy of eternal life with him. That is God's ultimate goal.

Unfortunately, there are other forces which fight with God over us. Other things seek to control us and turn us away from God. We give the name "sins" to these things, and we know what they are, for God has both provided the Ten Commandments, and given us the Holy Spirit as our guide. In general, a sin is anything which replaces God as first in our hearts. Remember Jesus' two greatest commandments (I talk about them all the time!): Love God with all your heart and soul, and love your neighbour — that is, all other people — as yourself. Anything that stands in the way of this divine ordering of things is a sin. And it can be hard to resist the allure, the attraction of those things that cause us to sin. I am not one who condemns modern institutions, such as the internet, or social media, but we know they offer good, and bad. They can have great influence on our lives. They can build us up — think of the worship music we play here, or listen to on our own. Or they can tear us down — think of conspiracy theories, or preachers who proclaim the Word of God falsely. It's like anything else: we have to be on our guard against false ideas and false prophets. And sometimes we listen to the bad things, even though we know we shouldn't.

Paul spoke about this in his letter to the Romans: he says

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that

dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:15-20)

We sometimes have to fight against our own selves, in order to keep the voice of God front and centre in our lives. But it's important to see that Paul is talking about us, *without God*. *With God*, we can respond to the good, and turn away the bad. By letting God build us up into a holy house, we are saved.

I feel that God has been building me for many years. I came to faith late in life, and he has continually added new little bits on to me since I first put my faith in Jesus, and perhaps even before. Perhaps God builds onto you spare rooms, that you don't use right now, but later you'll be glad you have them. Some are big, important rooms, like lounges or kitchens; others are small bedrooms or coat closets. One day I wandered into a room I hadn't been into before. This room held my first opportunities to truly hear God's word. I feel now that I had known about this room for some time but didn't feel a need to enter it, just as I had known about Christianity in one way or another for many years, but felt it wasn't for me. Once I entered, I began to realise how important this room is, and I've tried to keep it furnished and heated ever since, so I could spend time there. Since then God has built other rooms, ones where I learned more about Jesus Christ, where I learned about my calling into ordained ministry, ones where I developed other gifts or found new opportunities to serve God and his people. It is a process of building that I hope and pray will go on until the end of my life here on earth — and if I keep open to God, I think it will.

So — what rooms is God building onto you now?