

Easter 4 25th April 2021

Acts 4:5-12

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

The context for today's reading from Acts is Peter and John healing a lame man in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:2) which then results in Peter preaching the resurrection of Jesus to a whole bunch of people in the Temple. That gets them arrested. The next day a whole bunch of the temple religious establishment show up to grill Peter and John (rulers, elders, scribes, the high priest and members of the high-priestly family (we might remember that Caiaphas was the one who had argued that it was expedient that one may die for the sake of the nation (John 11:50). They want to know on whose authority ('by what name') they are healing and preaching. In response to this question, Peter says:

Acts 4:10-11 *let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.*

This terminology for Jesus as being a rejected cornerstone is used repeatedly by the first (apostolic) witnesses and just to highlight this I want to read a few passages where it shows up just so we can get a FEEL for how important it is:

Psalm 118:22 *The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

Isaiah 8:14-15 [the context here is the looming threat of the Assyrian empire and rejection of Isaiah's message to the people from God]. *He (the Lord) will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.*

Isaiah 28:26 *therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not panic."*

Luke 20:17-18 [here Jesus is speaking] *But he looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.*

1 Peter 2:6-8 ⁶ *For it stands in scripture:*

*"See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him^[a] will not be put to shame."*

⁷ *To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,*

*"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,"*

⁸ *and*

*"A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall."*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

1 Corinthians 1:23 *we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,*

Romans 9:33 *See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame*

So why is this stone, which is Jesus himself, rejected and why is it so important that he is a cornerstone and a foundation? So much so that Peter ends his speech by saying, *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved”*.

Let me through in a little interlude here. I am the son of a builder. One of the things I learned from my father is that all the building work starts from a specified corner, from which we take straight and square lines. I watched my Father build more than one house from bricks. The first brick is laid (the corner stone). String lines are then taken of that corner in the other directions. If that first string line is out of square, or not exactly horizontal, then everything goes pear shaped from there. I recently build a little cabinet into our house. Because nothing in this old house was horizontal or square – neither the walls nor the floor (basically because who ever built the place did a shoddy job), I had to do multitudes of careful corrections to build a new foundation, which was square and horizontal enough, from which to build upwards.

To return to our story....Jesus IS the cornerstone of an entirely new construction – which is a people of God – the place of God’s dwelling – which replaces the old physical structure of the temple.

The first letter of Peter says, *“like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”*. (1 Peter 2:5). The builder of this new temple was not the priestly families of the old temple, but the Holy Spirit. No wonder the old priestly caste was outraged. They were about to lose their jobs AND their status.

This corner stone of this new temple is the Jesus - crucified and risen. This was a complete scandal that tripped up everyone who came across it. It simple did not compute. To be crucified was to be vilified, rejected, humiliated, shamed. That a crucified human could be the foundation of everything in the cosmos was utterly incomprehensible. But what was even more scandalous that Jesus would be raised as a forgiving victim. The resurrection of Jesus was unlike other stories in the ancient world of resurrected gods who came back to enact a terrible revenge on those who killed them. The resurrected Jesus came back with the power of only love and healing especially for the poor and outcast – which had just been demonstrated the day before by Peter and John healing a crippled man.

It’s the centrality of Jesus AS a forgiving victim which changes the nature of human relationships and makes a new kind of world peace possible. This is what Peter is driving at when he says, *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among **mortals by which we must be saved**”*.

This is not meant to be a verse which is used to bludgeon non-believers as a kind of Christian triumphalism. It’s saying there is no other way in which the world can be saved from violence EXCEPT by way of the forgiving victim who IS the forgiving God. Unless we set ourselves on this foundation it is inescapable that we will make victims of each other. Outside the influence of Jesus, the forgiving victim, as our chief cornerstone, humans WILL kill each other, either metaphorical or literally, in order to try to secure our own interests. And we will probably use some kind of religious or moral self-justification to do it. But any true and lasting justice can only be brought about through seeing each other, including our enemies, as loved and forgiven. Who have been the people in our lives who have really deeply SEEN us and mediated God’s unconditional forgiveness to us despite all our failings and fallibilities?