

Ps 44:1,2
 Ps 51:1
 Ps 2:1,2,3,4
 Ps 118:6,8
 Ps 56:4; Hy 61:5,6
 1 Peter 2:4-12
 Daniel 2:24-49
 1 Peter 2:5a

Yarrow, November 15, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Remembrance Day this past week has awakened its own level of national consciousness and pride; we're grateful to be Canadians. That sense of pride in turn awakens the desire to contribute positively to the country in which we're allowed to live. Help build up the Canadian community: it's something we too want to do. By the grace of God, some of us receive a position in society by which we can contribute very positively. That gives reason for gratitude.

Many others of us, though, experience that it's difficult to contribute to building up the country in any measurable way. That's due to the fact that we want our contribution to be distinctly Christian – and *that's* a contribution our society-as-a-whole does not welcome. So we find that many of us who would like to contribute are sidelined; we can't even get to first base without giving up something of our principles. We experience this as frustrating, and perhaps even thinking that somehow we're second rate citizens of our country. Somehow, we're aliens here, strangers.... And that discourages us....

Canada's King, however, would not have us feel inadequate or inferior. Our compatriots may insist on building a Canada that has no real place for God Almighty in the nation's leadership and social chemistry, but the Lord God would have us know that He's building a better society, and you and I are allowed to be essential components of this society. And this better society will outlast Canada by a long shot....

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

SOCIETY'S OUTCASTS ARE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF GOD'S NEW SOCIETY.

1. Who are the Outcasts,
2. What God makes of the Outcasts,
3. Why God does so.

1. Who are the outcasts.

Peter's letter is, of course, addressed to particular people. It turns out that these people are –as vs 11 of our chapter has it– “aliens and strangers in the world” (cf also 1:1,17). The force of those two words is simply that Peter's readers did not feel at home in their community. They lived, says 1:1, “throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia”, provinces of the great Roman Empire located in the north-western corner of present-day Turkey. Perhaps they were displaced persons, people forcibly removed from their homes and native lands by imperial decree (for it's known that the emperor issued such decrees pertaining to that part of his empire), or perhaps they were locals who felt

like the displaced persons around them. Whatever the case was, the people Peter addressed were strangers and aliens in the eyes of their neighbours, and they felt themselves to be so.

What it was that made their neighbours consider them to be “strangers and aliens”? They earned their reputation from their conduct. For the people to whom Peter writes refused to do the sorts of things common to society around them. That’s clear from Peter’s words in 4:2f: because the Christian has done with sin, “he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” So the Christian doesn’t participate in the conduct common to the neighbours; the Christian has put away “living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” And that, of course, was the inevitable spin-off of the fact that they’re born again through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, as Peter had explained in detail in chapter 1. But exactly of their different standards for behaviour, the neighbours thought they were weird. Chap 4:4: “they think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” The Christians Peter addressed experienced it sharply: they were strangers in their communities, their neighbours thought them odd. And that in turn put them on the outer when it came to social involvement or contributing to community. Though they lived in town, they didn’t *belong*.

In fact, Peter alludes to that same thought in vs 4 of our chapter. He speaks of Jesus Christ as “the living Stone”, and then adds that this living Stone is “rejected by men”. As people-in-general rejected Jesus Christ, so people-in-general reject those who belong to Jesus Christ, the people who’ve been born anew. It’s par for the Christians’ course; as their Master was rejected, so they will themselves be rejected.

So there’s the question. Is being a Christian, is belonging to Christ, really worth it? O sure, when one dies it’s worth it, for one enters the New Jerusalem – and that’s something to look forward to. But what about the price today? Isn’t it better to be involved in society? Is it really worth it to be publicly seen as a stranger and alien – with all the social stigma that comes with that as well as the isolation that results? Ought one not to lower one’s standards, recognize we live in a particular culture, and go along with it to some degree? It’s a question, congregation, that we’re ever busy with ourselves, and it’s one that Peter takes up in the remainder of his book. Before he takes up that matter, though, he makes a point of giving his readers great encouragement. That’s the passage before us this morning. The power of his encouragement does not lie in a call to get one’s shoulders under community development in the sense that Christians need to get out there, get involved and change the world – as if the community’s well-being depends on their effort. Instead, the power of Peter’s encouragement lies in the work that God has done and is continuing to do in the community in which He has put Christians. That’s our second point:

2. What God makes of these outcasts.

Notice the way Peter puts the text together. He tells his readers that they “are being built into a spiritual house.” Who’s doing the building? The way the sentence runs makes it clear that *it’s not the Christians themselves who are building themselves* into some sort of house. Whether they like it or not, the building *is happening to them*. Who’s doing the building? Clearly, the builder is God Himself. People on earth may be busy building their community, their nation, their empires, but even while people are building *God is building too*. More, people may reject certain inhabitants of their community as worthy contributors to community growth, but God takes these very rejects and builds them into a very special house.

It’s a marvellous thought. The Christians Peter addresses were once common people of society, no different from anyone else. But God had “chosen” them for Himself (1:2), and so caused them to be

born anew through the mighty work of Jesus Christ (1:3). Because these 'normal people' were born again, they were delivered from the narrow worldview that one has when one lives only in the womb – as if what one sees in the womb is the full extent of reality. These elect people receive the privilege of coming outside the womb, and so seeing that there's much more to reality – specifically, that God is real and that He's given His Son to pay for sin, yes, and this Son is now enthroned as King over all the world. This Christ is the "living Stone" of 2:4, and the born-again Christian understands that this Stone is King of kings. This "living Stone" is an illusion to the vision of Daniel, where that little stone "was cut out, but not by human hands," and it struck the statue and smashed it, and "became a huge mountain" that "filled the whole earth." Stones, we know, don't grow, but this one did; this stone was *alive*. That stone, of course, is Jesus Christ, who by His death and resurrection has triumphed over sin and Satan and so could be elevated to the throne at God's right hand to be King of kings and Lord of lords. The statue Daniel saw with its head of "gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay" represented the empires of Babylon, of the Medes and Persians, of the Greeks and of the Romans respectively – and all were crushed by the might of Christ's supremacy. Note it well: even the omnipotent Roman Empire of which Peter's addressees were a part was but chaff under the crushing weight of that living Stone, Jesus Christ. Then the Romans may think to build a great empire, and the locals may think to build a marvellous community, but the Christians Peter writes to, the elect of God, have been born again to know that reality is bigger than the eye sees. For the Roman Empire is but crushed dust before the living Stone of Jesus Christ. And the Christians of the empire have, by God's goodness in Christ, been regenerated so as to "come to Him, the living Stone."

More, exactly because they by God's power have come to the living Stone that society rejects, God takes these Christians and builds them into "a ... house". To God these Christians are also "living stones", for they share in what belongs to Christ. As He's alive, so they are alive. As He has triumphed so as to crush earthly kingdoms and become King of kings, so Christians are kings with Him. That's why the apostle can say in vs 9 that his addressees are 'royal', kingly.

How marvellous the picture! God on high at work on earth, taking people He has caused to be born again, and setting them –stones alive through Jesus Christ– setting them one on the other to be a house. Intriguing: while the emperor is busy constructing his empire and the locals are busy building their community, God Most High is very busy on earth also, busy constructing a *house*. The labours of the emperor were impressive as he built a mighty empire; even today one can tour throughout Rome and Greece and Turkey and find so many remnants of the once mighty Roman Empire – it *was* a marvellous entity. But it was built by human hands, and in the course of time it collapsed.... For human work will ultimately not last.... But the house the Lord God is building from living stone is far more splendid. For the living stones from which God builds this house are not just pieces of wall, for the house that God builds is not one of stone and mortar but is a "spiritual house". The term "spiritual" is not meant to say that God's construction is not 'material', but the point is that the house God is building is filled with the Holy Spirit, is Spirit-driven. And that's to say that this is a house that makes a fitting dwelling place for the Holy Spirit! Here's the word of Jesus Christ in John 14:23: "we will come to him and make our home with him." Father and Son in the Spirit, come to live in a regenerated sinner – what a marvel!! Let kings build empires, let governments build cities, but this is the most marvellous of all – that God Almighty is building for Himself a house on earth, a house made of sinners reborn!!

And look at the fixtures in this Spirit-driven house! The house God builds on earth consists of people who function as priests – yet not as priests in a heathen religion but as "a holy priesthood". Priests in Israel stood between God and the people of Israel, presenting the people's sacrifices to God

and passing on God's instruction to the people. In the house God builds the priesthood does not stand between God and the people, but the priesthood is the people itself, each Christian individually – for the Holy Spirit has been poured out and made His home in each believer. As priests in God's house, each believer offers himself to God, daily in word and conduct showing what the gospel of redemption looks like. What privilege: those born again through the Holy Spirit may *show* their born-again characteristics – and it's exactly those characteristics that make society think you're strange, odd, out-of-step, and so they puzzle at what makes you tick....

But so be it, Peter assures his readers. They may trip over you, but –vs 9– “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” Wonderful names those are, names borrowed from two chapters in the Old Testament. The one is Exodus 19, the words God spoke to Israel when He made with Israel His covenant of love at Mt Sinai and claimed them for Himself, and the other is Isaiah 43 when the Lord describes why He will redeem His own from exile. Both Old Testament chapters catch the notion of God's tender love for undeserving Israel, and so point up the privileged position Israel may have to be treasured by this gracious God. And that's the force in 1 Peter 2 as well. Unbelieving society rejects those who are born again and considers them strangers and aliens, but God has a different evaluation of them. “A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”: what privilege indeed! Talk about being special!!

And even that's not all. For Peter continues with the words of vs 10: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” “Not a people”: that was indeed society's assessment. You're strangers, you don't belong; you're not a people that has any standing in the community, that has any contribution to make. Instead of mercy from their community they received abuse.... But the Lord speaks so differently to His own! Strangers, aliens – and God says to them, “My people!” Unworthy of respect, not given a place in the community – and God shows them mercy! What a privilege indeed!

The privilege, of course, comes with a responsibility. A “holy priesthood” needs to act the part, and that's to say that one “offers spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (vs 5b). Those spiritual sacrifices look like something, Peter explains in vs 9b, for he adds that those whom God has privileged to be “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” are also called to “declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.” Yes, that's a lifestyle thing, for those whom God has chosen out of the world can't act as if they are still part of the world. But Peter's emphasis here isn't on lifestyle but on words, on *telling* others of the wonders of what God has done. It's a matter of sharing with those who don't appreciate your contribution that you know yourself *not inferior* and why that's so.

A bit ashamed to be shunned by society, self-conscious because we're seen as strangers? Peter leaves no room for that sentiment! His words in our passage leave space only for the emotion of gratitude: what a God that He would make us His, build us into a spiritual house! Here's no place for feeling inferior, but here's place only for adoring the God who lifted us above the vanity of this world's kingdom-building and gave us a place in a new order of things that never perishes!

Yes, it's a glorious perspective. But isn't it too glorious to be true? That's our last point:

3. Why God builds with outcasts.

Why might it be that God would build a spiritual house, and include the outcasts of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia in its construction? Peter explains through his quotes from the Old Testament. Vs 6: “in Scripture it says” in Isaiah 28:16: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Peter's point in

quoting this text: God had a plan from long ago to construct a new building in Zion, in place of the stone temple Solomon had built there. This building would begin with a critical and well-placed cornerstone, and every stone added thereafter that lays correctly against this cornerstone would never be dislocated. In the course of time the Lord God got to work on that construction, and the cornerstone He laid so perfectly is, we understand, the Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ on the cross atoned for sin, destroyed the devil, and so could be crowned as King of kings; recall that passage from Daniel 2. This kingdom of Jesus Christ is the new building God is constructing, with Christ Himself as the key stone on whose solidity the stability of the building depends.

But there's now the thing: the kingdoms of this world have rejected the ascended Christ! Word has gone out to the world of Christ's triumph in Jerusalem over sin and death; His resurrection from the dead was public knowledge! But the headline that should have determined the decisions made by kings and emperors, by city councils and provincial governments was ignored – even as the Lord had foretold in Psalm 118: “the Stone the builders rejected has become the capstone” (quoted in vs 7) and in Isaiah 8: “a Stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (quoted in vs 8). How encouraging for the Christians, despised as they were in their society: God's plan as He announced it in the Old Testament is coming to pass; such is His sovereignty! But if this God is building a house, and I'm allowed to be part of that construction, how certain is my future!! Built as I am by God's mighty hand on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, I believe today that I shall “never be put to shame” (vs 6).

Then yes, around me I see countless thousands busy building up a this-worldly kingdom. But they have rejected Jesus Christ, the solid cornerstone of the New Jerusalem. Since they've rejected Him, they shall stumble, shall fall, shall be crushed under the living Stone that bowls them over. That's the conviction Peter would press upon his readers, a conviction valid as much today as it was in Peter's own day.

How, beloved, have things turned out? The mighty Roman Empire and its many provinces and cities and peoples have all perished. Without God and His Christ they built so many towers-of-men..., and today it's all gone.... But the church of Jesus Christ remains! Though shunned by men, though not esteemed in the eyes of the world, the church endures – for it's built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. And soon that King will appear on the clouds of heaven, a living Stone that will crush the kingdoms of this earth.... Then those who today shun Christians as unworthy contributors to the community will end up confessing that these Christians were right after all....

Christians today are sidelined from the levers of power in our society, are treated as strangers and aliens. It's something we don't like, and it makes us feel inadequate and even inferior to our neighbours. That is why our gracious God gives the encouragement of our passage. He would not have us feel inferior, but would give us instead every reason to hold our head high. In a world that rejects the King of kings, we'll declare the praises of Him who is today building a spiritual house – of which God's people –you and I– are an integral part. What privilege we have!