

three

A three-part
Bible Study on
1 Peter and the
theme of ministry

A Community Called to Ministry



We shall be covering a lot of material in this session, but, if possible, it is best treated together. There are regular stopping points for discussion as well as an invitation at the end to relate it to our own situations.

(i) Read again 1 Peter 2:1-11 which we began to explore last time; in this session we shall concentrate on verses 4-10:

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ 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. ⁶ For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him 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. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

As we noted last time, this is a dense passage, with different images tumbling upon one another, giving the reader little time to sort them out before moving on. You might want to compare translations or look at the way the passage is set out in the printout of passages (3). The following points may help you through the passage:

1. Last time we noted the plural address, 'you'. Here the focus is on verses 9-10, where it is a strong positive statement: not, would you like to be?; do you have a spare hour to be?; can you nominate someone/someone else to be?; one day you may hope to be; let's appoint our brightest and best to be. But **you are**.

This may make us feel uncomfortable or inadequate. In our society the emphasis is often on the abilities that individuals have, and on identifying our individual strengths or weaknesses. Indeed, elsewhere the New Testament speaks of the different gifts distributed among believers. In this passage all the images do not start from our skills, our faithfulness, our holiness, from what we bring, but start from God. Those who are being **built** up are being **built by God**; those who are **chosen**, do not

choose but are **chosen by God**; those who are a **nation** do not go to the polls to display their self-determination but are made a nation by God's act; those who are a **people** are for **God's possession**; those who are **holy** do not display their self-discipline but are holy because God is holy. **Compare 1:2**, "sanctified by the Spirit", and **1:15-16** "You shall be holy because I am holy".

How would these strong statements appear to the small scattered communities of 'scattered exiles', socially disregarded and easily the objects of scorn and hostility? The terms that 1 Peter has chosen could be said to be everything they were not – a nation, a race, even comfortable members of a household.

(See Slides 4 and 5, and the table at printout 4).

As seen by the world	As called by God
Of no fixed abode	A house
Rejected	Elect
Dispersed	A nation
Disgrace	Called
Nobodies	Royal
(v. 10) Darkness	Light
Not a people	A people

2 We may feel uncomfortable with some of these images, particularly those that have more political overtones. They are images from daily life, and they are not by themselves particularly religious or holy. History and experience have shown that all of them are open to abuse. This is true in society generally, when groups think they have this status on their own merit and for their own sake: nations resort to nationalism, races to racism, homes become castles, the 'chosen' behave like celebrity sportswomen and men. Throughout history the Church or groups of Christians have sometimes behaved in the same way.

This is why verses 4 and 6-8 are so important, and why they come first in the paragraph, before the statements about who 'they are':

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight,

... For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷ To you then who believe, high value [= preciousness]; 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."

To shape their re-imagining of themselves, and to point them outwards, the author reminds them that their story (and our story) is based on Christ's story: who you **are** is shaped by Christ; who or what you are **for** is also shaped by Christ (see Slide 6; printout 5):

Christ	Christians
Stone	Stones
Suffered and made alive	Living
Cornerstone	Being built (House/temple)
Rejected	Rejected
Chosen	Chosen
Precious/honoured	Honour for you who believe (1:9 precious)

Although the author does not tell the story of Jesus, he assumes that his readers know it. You might want to consider what examples he could have given.

3 As well as recalling the story of Christ, 1 Peter also delves into the spiritual and religious resources that have shaped the lives of these Christians and of generations of God's people before them. The author turns to Scripture and he reads Scripture as only someone soaked in it and in the patterns of study of Scripture of the time can do.

This may be less familiar to us and it would be helpful to take time over this and to look up the relevant passages. The key passages here are **Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22, and Isaiah 8:14**; the author treats them together because each of them uses the word "stone" (See Slide 7 and print out 6). (Some users of this Bible study may be aware of or want to explore how these passages are also used elsewhere in the New Testament with reference to Jesus).

Scripture (1 Peter 2:6-8)	Christ/Christians
(<i>Isaiah 28:16</i>) Behold I set in Zion a stone as a corner stone, chosen, precious, and the one who believes in it will not be shamed + (<i>Psalms 118:22</i>) the stone which the builders rejected has been made the head of the corner + (<i>Isaiah 8:14</i>) a stone causing stumbling ... and a rock causing offence	Stone/ stones (v. 4/ v. 5) Rejected (v. 4/ cf. 2:20; 4:4) Chosen (v. 4/ v. 9; cf. 1:1 [= 'elect']) Precious (v. 4/ v.7) <i>Not shamed</i> <i>Head of the corner</i>

1 Peter's images do not come from handbooks on leadership or organisational management but from Scripture. This is a two-way process: the present is seen through the lens of Scripture; Scripture is re-imagined in the present.

Does that mean that these images are outdated, and are no longer relevant to the modern world? When used in this way the answer is a clear 'no', because these images are a reminder of the way God works, in God's dealing with God's people. Scripture is not a ball and chain which restricts possibilities and ties its readers to the past; it does not block but enables the creative imagination. We saw this last session in 1 Peter's use of Hosea in verse 10. These scriptural images are absolutely relevant to the needs of the people on Peter's own time, reimagined, and can continue to be in our time.

At the same time, these images are open ended; we might say that they slide into the future, inviting new acts of association, interpretation, and imagination (See Slide 8):

Stones direct our attention to a house (v. 4 > v.5); these are living stones because Christ is alive (v. 5 > v. 4);
they become a spiritual house (v. 5)
which is a house that also lives, indwelt by the spirit (v. 5).
A living house is a household or a home.
It may even become a royal house or household hold (v. 9, 'kingdom/palace')

At the same time, the scriptural background means that

a house leads us to imagine a Temple (eg John 2:16);
the 'spiritual house' (v. 5) may be a Temple for the spirit.
As a Temple it is a place where the priesthood (v. 5, 9) offers sacrifices.
As a holy priesthood (because God is holy) it offers holy sacrifices (v. 5).

We do not have to choose between either a house/home (for the homeless: see session 2), or a spiritual house/Temple. The power of images is that they let us have it both ways and see where that takes us! You might want to discuss where they take you.

4. 1 Peter's scriptural imagination does not end there. Again, reaching back into Scripture, another conversation is created, between (i) the foundational moment when God created a people for God's self at Mount Sinai following the Exodus (Exodus 19-20), and (ii) the prophetic vision offered to the exiles in Babylon as to what God would yet do in the future (*Isaiah 43*). Although this time it does not say explicitly that this is a quotation from Scripture, few at the time would miss the allusions (see Slide 9, and the texts at printout 7):

(**Exodus 19:4-6**) You saw all I did to the Egyptians and how I lifted you up as on the wings of eagles, and brought you to myself, and now if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be shall be a people for me to possess among all the nations. For all the earth is mine. You shall be for me a kingly priesthood (a realm, a priesthood), and a holy nation +

(**Isaiah 43:20-21**) the wild beasts shall praise me ... because I gave water in the wilderness and a river in the dry land so that my chosen race might drink, my people whom I took possession of in order to recount my might acts

Look these passages up and discuss the importance of their setting. If the readers of 1 Peter knew these wider contexts, what might they have drawn from them?

Finding themselves secure in the record of God's decisive work in the past, and anticipating God's future, 1 Peter's audience discover what it is to be called to be God's people today – they are called to continue God's purposes for God's people and for the world. Notice how 1 Peter weaves together the promises (See Slide 10; printout 8):

God's people in Scripture	Called to be God's people today
(Exodus 19.4-6) You saw all I did ... and now if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be a people for me to possess among all the nations. For all the earth is mine. You shall be for me a kingly priesthood (a realm, a priesthood) , and a holy nation + ... (Isaiah 43:20-21) because I gave water in the wilderness and a river in the dry land so that my chosen race might drink, my people whom I took possession of in order to recount my might acts	(1 Peter 2:5, 9) A holy priesthood A chosen race A royal priesthood A holy nation A people for my possession

These images drawn from the Exodus and from its hope of renewal in Isaiah transform how those addressed understand who they are and who they are called to be. To be exiles, temporary visitors, foreigners, migrants, those who are dispersed or part of a dispersion, becomes, as it was for the people of Israel in the wilderness, a journey into the future, a vocation.

5. It might be enriching to explore each element of this way of imagining and re-imagining for our own time what it means to be called as the people of God. But there is here one phrase which has had particular resonances in our Methodist tradition and indeed in the Protestant tradition in the form of 'the priesthood of all believers'.

The Methodist Deed of Union states:

Deed of Union 4: The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the **priesthood of all believers** and consequently believes that no priesthood exists

which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised. (See Slide 11; printout 9).

Although that language has often been used polemically, against other traditions which use the language of 'priesthood' to denote the exclusive functions of the ordained ministry, its roots are not polemical but in our passage from 1 Peter. Many people now feel uncomfortable with this language, perhaps because the idea of 'priests' brings with it a range of associations that we feel are not part of what as Methodists we represent. It may also be language that those outside the church find difficult to understand; it does not speak to their experience. However, before dismissing it we should take time to consider why it is important for 1 Peter.

Indeed, it comes twice in this passage: A **holy priesthood** (v. 5) and a **royal priesthood** (v. 9).

Priests were familiar in Israel, where their main focus was in the Temple but they also served, often teaching the people, in the villages. They were also familiar in the surrounding society of 1 Peter's time, where every town had many temples or religious centres, with their own priests. As in our own context, there was no single or dominant model of what being a priest might mean. However, at its core, especially in Scripture, was a double-facing (or perhaps four-way-facing) role. Namely, they represented God to the people, and to the wider society; and at the same time they represented both the people and the wider society to God.

They could do this, not because they were different from other human beings or had special qualities or gifts, but because they had been set apart for this purpose. This now is the vocation of all those to whom 1 Peter speaks, of all who believe.

1 Peter defines the sort of priesthood they are to be. To be **holy** does not mean a form of moral superiority or unblemished character. In the Bible to be holy is to be set apart for God and facing God, to be open

to God. As we have seen these believers are called to be holy because God is holy – they are called to reflect God’s nature, for God can enable them so to do.

The second description is more difficult. As we have seen, it is taken from Exodus, and there are a number of different ways of translating it, both there and in 1 Peter. You might find: a royal priesthood; a kingly priesthood; priests of the King; a kingdom of priests, a priestly royal house. (At Exodus 19:6 Wycliffe translates ‘a realm of priests’). Each of these may suggest to you something different and you may prefer one over others. Does it mean a priesthood which is royal, because it belongs to the King and is in service of the King (It is difficult to avoid gendered language here, but have a go!)? Or is the emphasis on a royal body, a kingdom, a realm, a palace, which is identified by a particular priestly activity?

Since 1 Peter is quoting a passage of Scripture that had been read and interpreted over the centuries, the author may not have only one idea in mind. As we have seen, ambiguity, or opening areas to explore is part of the power of images.

6 Wherever we put the emphasis, this is not a matter of status or special office, but about priestly activity. Both v. 5 and v. 9 immediately go on to what this priesthood (‘you’) is **to do**. They are **“to offer spiritual sacrifices”**, offerings empowered by the Spirit; offerings to God and for others. They are to

do this not for their own sake but for the sake of the world, and for the sake of God at work in the world. They are to proclaim – in word but also in action – the **“mighty acts” that God has done**. These mighty acts can be summarized as bringing people **out of darkness into God’s glorious light**’.

God’s people in Scripture	Called to be God’s people today
...you shall be a people for me to possess <u>among all the nations.</u> For all the earth is mine. You shall be for me a kingly priesthood and a holy nation ... my chosen race ... my people of whom I took possession <u>in order to recount my mighty acts</u>	a spiritual house, a holy priesthood <u>to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ...</u> You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for my possession <u>in order to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you from darkness to his wonderful light</u>

Once again, this is what they are called to do together as a people, as a nation, as a race. The passage is not saying, ‘you are a priest’, ‘and you’, ‘and you’, ‘and me’. Together this is our calling as people of God. It is for us to explore how each of us can share in that glorious calling. (See Slide 12; printout 10)



A final discussion

This Bible study has tried to keep attention on the first audience of 1 Peter, in their situation. Discuss what such a calling might mean for the audience as you have imagined them. But then you might want to go through these notes, replacing all the references to ‘they’ with ‘we/us’.

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