

What do we consider precious? Given that today is Mother's Day I hope most of you immediately think of your mother! Good Mum's are precious, of that there is no doubt. I look at my beautiful wife and see the mother she is to our children, and grandchildren, and I thank God for her. I look at my mother-in-law, the matriarch of the family, and admire her steadfastness, stability and faith. Mothers, be they biological, maternal or spiritual, play a vital part in our lives. In life and faith, they are precious to us. We should be thanking God for them regularly and encouraging them in their multitude of tasks and roles. I hope you are making the mothers around you feel very special today ... or if you've just dragged yourself out of bed because it's easier to get to church at the moment by pushing a few buttons ... you will look after them later today.

In writing to the early church, the apostle Peter uses this term 'precious', meaning of considerable worth or value, to refer to God's view of both Jesus and us. Peter's use of this particular term is quite clever. The etymology of the word, it's origin, refers to precious stones. In the Jewish world, one might think of the precious stones that adorned the front of the high priest's robes; a selection of precious stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel, symbolically close to God's heart. The passage we heard today contains one of the most powerful metaphors in the Scripture. A metaphor of our relationship to God and of the nature of the church, the body of believers.

Peter states that we come to Jesus, the Living Stone, a stone rejected by men but Chosen by God. We know how Jesus was rejected by the religious and secular authorities, tortured, died and rose again. Rejection by people is not an overwhelming concern to God. God sees the potential and beauty within each person regardless of what the world says or how they see themselves. This should be a great encouragement for anyone who feels let down by others or themselves. Jesus has experienced rejection, so God knows exactly how it feels. What is rejected by the world can be precious to God. Jesus was and we are.

Notice here that Jesus is referred to as a Living Stone. It seems a strange juxtaposition of adjective and noun. A Stone is not considered a living thing but rather a solid state of matter that is strong and unyielding, heavy, often difficult to manage, can only be crafted with great effort and lasts indefinitely. Hmm ... we might think of some people like that! Stones are unfeeling, without intelligence or life, growth or development. In contrast, something living is malleable, soft, comparatively weak and short lasting. Many living things, certainly those of a higher order, also express thought, intelligence and even spirit. They can grow and develop in many ways. And when it comes to people there is a life, spirit, intelligence and creativity of a whole other order. A "living stone", a stranger combination can hardly be imagined, so what is being said here?

The imagery is developed in the following passage. We come to the "Living Stone" as "living stones" ourselves to be built into a "spiritual house". Now we can see where the imagery is going. The metaphor hinges to a degree on a picture of the Jerusalem Temple. Today cornerstones are largely symbolic. You see them set on the corners of public buildings, inscribed with a tribute by some significant person at the opening event. Traditionally, in stone buildings, the Cornerstone was the key to the success of the whole building. It had two primary functions. Firstly, it set the direction, the orientation, of the building. For many ancient cultures such as the Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Incas,

the setting of a foundation stone was the cause of a great religious celebration. In the case of the Inca, human sacrifices were encased in the foundations so important was marking the occasion and getting the foundation stone perfectly right. Many early cultures aligned their buildings with the stars and the readings they took determined the planting of crops, festivals and life in general, so the position of the Cornerstone was everything. From that foundation stone every wall and floor, every other stone, took its position and angle. Secondly, large cornerstones were particularly used where strength was required, specifically in buildings that had to weather various storms, geographic and atmospheric conditions. The whole structure took its strength, cohesion and stability from that one block, effectively leaning into its solid, unmoving mass giving greater strength to the whole. While we cannot see the Jerusalem Temple today there is a close parallel we can see. At the base of the Western Wall is a massive stone which forms the base of the wall that supports the Temple Mound. The stone is colossal and supports a wall and platform that has withstood thousands of years of history. A similar stone would have been the cornerstone for Herod's Jerusalem Temple. It stood until removed by the Romans in 70AD as the Temple was destroyed stone by stone, as Jesus had prophesied, as the Romans dug out any morsel of melted gold after they had burned the Temple. Metaphorically, Jesus is the Living Stone of the Church, the solid, reliable, powerful base on which we rely. A cornerstone that cannot be removed.

Peter continues building the metaphor. We too are stones, built on foundation stone. Peter puts it beautifully: **As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

Don't you love that! We are being built... a continuous present. We are being carefully and skilfully crafted into the shape that we need to be in to take our place in the house that God is building. Each one of us uniquely, carefully, individually worked so like a fine gem our best colour and shine is brought forth. I've watched a couple of those gem finder documentaries on TV and it's awesome to watch those guys at work. In the depths of the earth they can spot a gem in the midst of dirt and clay and dust and rock that I couldn't see for the life of me. Yet they could see it and visualise it's potential. With increasing care they would break out gem, remove the sediment around it and then later cut and polish it so that the most amazing gems, full of life and colour would be revealed. That's like what God is doing with us. Taking off the rough edges, cutting and smoothing us so that the inner beauty will shine through. The process is not always easy but the result is stunning. It's like the world throws people away but the Lord sees the inner beauty and is able to bring for the very best and build us into His glorious house.

Peter goes on to say that are a result **“you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 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.”** In this concerning time of disease and uncertainty it is wonderful to know that God knows us, that God not only cares for us but uses the circumstances of life to grow and mould us. Similarly, it has been so encouraging to see, all over the world, Christians come together to encourage one another as friends, as brothers and sisters, as spiritual mothers and fathers and children, irrespective of anything else. In many ways the church as it should be. And today

especially, on Mothers' Day to be reminded of all those wonderful women God has used in our lives to help in this process just as they too are being helped. We are called together as God's special people and this should lead us naturally to the praise of our Lord who indeed calls us, even in the darkest times into His light.

It's worth noting of course that the attribution of maleness to God, as Jesus told us to pray to God as our Heavenly Father, is entirely appropriate as we understand that God is not remote from us in any way and so we can have some understanding of His love for us. But equally true is the nurture of God, like a mother, as epitomised by the feminine attribution of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures and that lovely imagery that Jesus uses in Matthew 23:37, "**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.**" (I love that photo of the chickens but not sure about the expression on the Mother's face ... but maybe appropriate huh? Anyway ...) Of course, God is God and neither male nor female. Mothers as they nurture, reflect some aspects of the Divine that we so much appreciate.

As God shapes us into His ideal design, individually and as part of His Holy Temple, we begin to recognise how precious we are. How many of you love doing jigsaw puzzles? I know lots of people have been doing them lately! Isn't it frustrating when you dig out an old, beautiful puzzle you haven't done for years and redo it only to find one or more pieces missing. You can carefully make a replacement but it's not the same, it is not all that is should be, it is so frustrating! That's how the Temple of God is. Each one of us is part of the picture. Each one of us is important. The picture looks complete when we are there and when each one is shining and bright as it should be. What's more, individually shaped stones, interlocked together and locked together into a solid Foundation Stone are incredibly strong. There are buildings across the world from some of the earliest ziggurats, to the Egyptian, Babylonian, Mayan pyramids and temples that have lasted millennia. The Temple of God, built of His faithful people with Christ as the Cornerstone, will last forever.

So, as we celebrate Mothers' Day we are reminded that we should value what is truly precious, what is truly important and what will last. What is imparted into us and what we do with it, what we impart to others and what they do with it and most importantly what God imparts to us and what we do with it, determines our eternity. We are blessed greatly when we have had mothers of faith who have encouraged and supported us, as we too can bless others. Today we can and should be grateful and express that gratitude to our mothers and to God because that is fitting and right. And in all of this ... may His Temple be built and our Mothers be celebrated. Happy Mothers' Day. Praise the Lord! You are precious in His sight.

Amen