

1 Peter 2:4-10

The glory of being a stranger

Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials* has an interesting take on God. The two heroes, Lyra and Will, live under the oppressive and mysterious power of 'the Magisterium' which is clearly the church. They are intimidated by tales of 'the Authority' who is reputed to be the creator of all things. However in the last book, *the Amber Spyglass* when they finally find him they find that he is a pathetic wispy little angel who has been locked in a crystal box by the Magisterium. Lyra says

"Oh, Will, he's still alive! But-the poor thing...." Will saw her hands pressing against the crystal, trying to reach in to the angel and comfort him; because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away in the lowest corner. "He must be so old-I've never seen anyone suffering like that-oh, Will, can't we let him out?" Will cut through the crystal in one movement to help the angel out. Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like another threat. "It's all right," Will said "We can help you hide, at least. Come on, we won't hurt you." The shaking hand seized his and feebly held on. The old one was uttering a wordless growing whimper that went on and on, and grinding his teeth, and compulsively plucking at himself with his free hand; but as Lyra reached in, too, to help him out, he tried to smile, and to bow, and his ancient eyes deep in their wrinkles blinked at her in innocent wonder. Between them they helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for he was light as paper and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and the sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief.¹

Pullman is echoing a passage written by the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. There Nietzsche says

He was a concealed god, addicted to secrecy.... When he was young, this god out of the Orient, he was harsh and vengeful and he built himself a hell to amuse his favourites. Eventually, however, he became old and soft and mellow and pitying, more like a grandfather than a father, but most like a shaky old grandmother. Then he sat in his nook by the hearth, wilted, grieving over his weak legs, weary of the world, weary of willing, and one day he choked on his all-too-great pity.²

It is not difficult to see where Pullman and Nietzsche got their view of God. Go into any town or village in Europe and you will see a great stone churches and very little living evidence of God. It is as if God has withered away and all we have left are empty buildings scattered like carcasses over a spiritual wasteland. Those of his followers who remain meet in mysterious conclaves to appoint their rulers, and prosecute their dissident butlers.

It is not difficult to believe Pullman and Nietzsche's view of God's demise. Somehow God seems to have faded away. Look at old pictures of the London skyline and you will

¹ Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, 1st ed. (Scholastic, 2011). p410-411.

² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra A Book for All and None*, trans. Thomas Common, 2012. p.264.

see it punctuated by spires and dominated by the great dome of St Paul's. Today they are obscured by tower blocks and dwarfed by the Gherkin, and the Shard.

Actually the world that Peter, the author of this letter, knew, was not that dissimilar. Peter grew up as Jew, and would have travelled to Jerusalem at least once a year. There he would have seen the magnificent Temple. But things were not looking good for the Jews or their Temple. Rome ruled in Palestine. And it wouldn't be many years before the Temple would be destroyed and the people scattered. God seemed rather insubstantial compared with the might of Rome.

To make things worse Peter had joined what looked at first like just an evangelical sect of Judaism. This little off-shoot had no buildings – neither a Temple, nor even local synagogues. They looked totally vulnerable. Indeed they were given a derogatory title. They were mockingly called “Christians.”

You will remember if you have been here for the last couple of weeks that it was to these vulnerable scattered people that Peter was writing.

1 Peter 1:1

We saw at the beginning that he describes them as “home and not home”. Reconciled to God but for now living in this world as scattered exiles.

Then last week we found Peter insisting that we must live differently. We must not dissolve into our surrounding culture but live different lives by focusing on our new hope, our new status, and the eternal forgiveness of Christ.

But this week in the third part of Peter's introduction to his letter he is dealing with a third issue. He is dealing with Christians' vulnerability.

When I read Philip Pullman's description of 'the Authority' in the *The Amber Spyglass* I asked a couple of my non-Christian friends whether his portrayal of a fading weak God corresponded with their observation of the world. They affirmed that it did.

Even in the minds of Christians perhaps we become self-protective, and timid in this world where God seems so weak.

Peter is going to tell us this morning that Philip Pullman has got it exactly wrong. In fact if you go behind the scenes of this world you will not find a cowering little will-o-the-wisp you will find an awesome, solid, unbreakable, unchangeable reality – Jesus.

He is a rock. He is the Living Stone. Peter uses that image in part, as we will see, because it is an image found in the Old Testament. But he uses it as well because it helps us grasp the awesome solidity of Jesus.

We will look this morning at accepting the 'Stone' – Jesus, and at rejecting the 'Stone'.

First accepting the 'Stone.'

➤ *Accepting the 'stone'*

1 Peter 2:4

Peter describes Jesus place in the world.

He is “rejected by humans”. That is impossible to miss in the gospels. Jesus was more or less rejected by everyone. And it wasn't just an unhappy accident. Jesus got under people's skin. At moments they applauded him saying 'who has ever spoken like this?' But slowly everyone also started to hate him. The revolutionaries were disappointed

because he wouldn't use force. The politicians hated him because he undermined their power. The nice people were furious because he exposed their hypocrisy. Even his disciples deserted him.

There is a story of leader of the TUC, the Trade Union Congress from a previous era waiting to speak at the annual conference. As he stood on the stage looking out over the vast throng he whispered to his neighbour

Look at all those people. All one great united body....against me.

Somehow Jesus managed that for all humanity and it took him to the cross, where his few friends failed him and his vast range of enemies crucified him.

But he was "chosen by God and precious to him."

But Peter's point is that Jesus' lot is ours.

1 Peter 2:5

He doesn't mention the 'rejected' bit – we can take that as read. The point is that we take on the character of Jesus as 'living stones.' And we get built together into a true Temple – a spiritual house. He then shifts his metaphor a bit to describe us also as 'priests' who do the work of the Temple too – offering sacrifices.

Notice that is every Christian – there is no theology of a separate priesthood in the New Testament. Every single Christian is a priest.

And the 'spiritual sacrifices' that we offer are not ritualised offerings of bread and wine, or anything else of that sort. Romans 12:1 makes it plain that offer our bodies, our whole selves to God in this new Temple worship.

This was just as the Bible always said.

1 Peter 2:6

Peter is quoting from the prophet Isaiah, here. Isaiah was using the language of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its Temple but even in Jewish thought in Peter's day the rabbis had begun to think of this 'cornerstone' as a person. So Peter slightly adjusts his quotation to make the plainer – he speaks of the one who trusts in HIM rather than it.

So here is the picture. Jesus is the perfectly hewn cornerstone of a new temple which is his people. That vast edifice in Jerusalem is of no further interest – let Rome overrun it, and raze it to the ground. As in fact they did in AD70. But when that happens that won't be a sign that God is somehow weak and insubstantial. No, God the Son Jesus Christ is the great eternal cornerstone of an unconquerable building – his church.

Notice a least four things here.

1. There is an emphasis on being built together (v5). You are not part of that eternal unshakeable building unless you built into the people of God. There is no such thing as a lone Christian in the Bible. All Christians are integrated into a local body of believers. If that is not you it is difficult to describe you as a Christian according to the bible.
2. Notice too the centrality of Jesus. He is the cornerstone. God's church is not fundamentally an institution. It is not built around traditions, or a moral code, or a particular culture of lifestyle. If any of those things takes centre stage it degenerates at best into a quaint club and at worst into a nasty clique. And it is not built around a person. I can't tell you how many times local people have described Magdalen Road to me as 'your church' not meaning the church to

which I belong but the church which somehow I have created. What rubbish!!! I hope there is no one who thinks that here.

A true church is built around Jesus. Around his life and teaching – which subverts our conventional expectations – legalists are exposed and alienated, prodigal sons are welcomed. It is built around Jesus death for our sins – so that we are united in our need of his forgiveness, united in trust in his death on the cross for our sins, united in worship of him for paying such a great price for us. And it is built around his resurrection as our hope. So that we are united in our solid expectation of eternal physical life in a new heaven and new earth, because Jesus rose from the dead, and walked the earth again. He is the cornerstone of this solid eternal unbreakable temple.

3. And notice how we accept this ‘stone.’ In v4 we ‘come to him’ – that is we turn away from anything else and start to follow him. That is called repentance. And in v6 we ‘trust in him’. That is what Christian faith is – simply trusting Christ, and entrusting ourselves to him.
4. And lastly notice the emphasis that Peter puts on shame. ‘who ever trusts in him will never be put to shame’ he says. Shame was big in the Romans world. One commentator says

[Christians were subjected to] a barrage of verbal abuse designed to demean, discredit, and shame the believers as social and moral deviants endangering the common good. This procedure of public shaming was employed as a means of social control with the aim of pressuring the minority community to conform to conventional values and standards of conduct.³

We are much more vulnerable to shame than we once were as a culture. What people think of us matters. But we have got to get used to that – relax into it almost, and certainly not be controlled by it. God will honour us – who cares about any other shame.

So, Christian, says Peter, as you come to Christ, and as a living stone are built into his church, you are being built into the one solid eternal thing in this whole world. Buildings, kingdoms, cultures, civilisations, come and go – the temple of God endures forever.

But then he talks about rejecting the stone

➤ *Rejecting the ‘stone’*

The first thing that God does as people reject him is he builds his church anyway.

1 Peter 2:7

Once again the Old Testament predicted this. This time Psalm 118. The psalmist pictures a stone which is deemed unsuitable for use in the building being cast aside. But amazingly they judged wrongly. A master builder comes along – he goes on to say “the Lord has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes” – this master builder spots the mistake and uses the stone as the cornerstone.

Our culture which rejects Jesus casts him aside and gets on with building in its own way and God quietly comes along and builds his own building with Christ as the cornerstone. All the evangelical churches in Oxford are growing at the moment. Today there are

³ Jobes, K. H. (2005). *1 Peter*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (152). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

about twice as many evangelical believers in Oxford as there were 20 years ago. That is why we are starting our plant in central Cowley – God is growing his church. That is partly why I feel called to start a new church in the centre. More or less all the existing evangelical churches are full. God is growing his church.

God's church thrives in situations of rejection. I remember 25 years ago going to Nepal for a summer. A church leader there said

“don't go home and make them feel sorry for our persecution, I have seen the church in your country and I am happy that we are persecuted a bit. It keeps us healthy.”

The Nepali church has exploded with growth in the last few decades as it lived under pressure. And thank the Lord as the pressure increases on Christians in this country his church is thriving too.

But the second thing Peter says about rejecting Christ is more sombre.

 **1 Peter 1:8**

Using Isaiah 8 this time he takes us back to the image of builders casting a stone aside. They then step back to admire their wonderful creation forgetting the stone behind them and they stumble and fall. Indeed Peter now describes Jesus as a 'Rock' and uses a word for falling which could mean a trap or a snare. Jesus is not some pebble he is a great solid reality. And when we reject him we fall into a trap from which, without his help, there is no escape.

This is the awesome reality behind the scenes. As we search for the truth we will not find Will and Lyra's fragile god preserved in a crystal case we will find the Rock of Ages. We will either be built into him, or be felled by him.

I want to say to you today – come to him. “Oh but I am not really disobeying him” you say. Listen to what he says

““Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:37–38, NIV)

He doesn't demand perfect obedience – no one could offer that. But vague obedience to a certain subset of his commands is not obeying him. He demands a commitment to him which transcends all others. Come to him.

And if you have come to him and trusted in him – live with confidence. Take risks for him. Don't fear any shame. He is the Living Stone.