

WELCOME 30th April 2023 – 4th SUNDAY IN EASTER '23 A

1 Peter 2:1-10

Welcome! It's great to be together again today! **Bible Study Qs** are there to equip you so God can lead you deeper into His word/work in your life, & so you can share that w/ someone else. We also use them for our **Zoom Bible Study Catch-ups** on Friday @ 1p.m.

As we move into this week Outsourcing...hiring a 3rd party to do something you **used** to do or **could** do for yourself is a common business practice. Like hiring someone to clean your house or do your gardening...that's outsourcing LWF "outsources" the detailed bookkeeping necessary to meet gov't acct stds & reqmnts.

Outsourcing w/ your garden, housecleaning, or a business/mfg functions is easy...but some things ONLY YOU can do FOR YOU. Martin Luther **said**: Everyone must do two things alone; they must do their own believing & their own dying. You have to live your own life. You have to take hold of your own faith...No one else can do those for you.

You are a chosen **people**. You are royal **priests**, a holy **nation**, God's very own **possession**. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

But neither your life nor your faith occur in a vacuum...1st God has acted in the crucified/risen Jesus to make you his & 2nd You are not alone in that choice/call. "People" "Priests" "Nation" "Possession" are all collective nouns...every "YOU" plural. As those who have been drawn into relationship w/ the Father through the loving sacrifice of the Son by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit we find our greatest fulfilment in proclaiming that good news to the world *UNITED* to other followers of Jesus.

Only together as church engaged in the world can we fully express the grace we've experienced & show the world the restoration, redemption & reconciliation w/ God & other people given to us in the *living hope* that is ours in Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

In the certainty of the risen Jesus we find our "new normal" in a unity that only exists in witness/mission to the world directly outside our doorsteps. We can never outsource our witness to our families, this city or the folks we encounter every day...

You – all of you together - are the tangible presence of Christ sent to light up the world.

We'll experience & share that today...Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Martin Luther)

Lord Jesus look upon us, empty vessels that needs to be filled. In faith we are weak—strengthen us. In love we are cold—set us alight so that your love may go out through us to our neighbour. We doubt and are unable to trust you fully. Lord, strengthen our trust in you. You are all the treasure we possess. We are poor, you are rich, and you came to have mercy on the poor. We are sinners, you are goodness. From you we receive goodness, justice & righteousness, but we can give you nothing in return. Therefore we shall stay with you & delight in you in the hope that you will use us for your glory. Jesus Christ alone Lord & Saviour we pray in your name --- Amen

Let's sing Only A Holy God...

FAITH CHAT:

1. When you think about the church at large, (not just Living Water or the one you frequent) what do you think is the church's greatest struggle, hurdle, obstacle...?
2. How does the church best demonstrate its oneness, (unity) even though we worship & live our common faith in Jesus differently from one another?
3. 'You are a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession.' Which of the four descriptions speaks most to you? Why?

PRAYER AFTER THE SERMON

Lord Jesus You alone build that which lasts forever, so use us to construct your church that grows and blesses this city with the good news of your victory over sin death & the devil. Build in us boldness that shares your life-transforming grace. Craft into our lives the unlimited capacity to imitate you in all we are & do. Mould our hearts to offer you daily praise and unceasing worship. Draw us close to you now and always...In your name we pray... Amen

4TH SUNDAY IN EASTER '23 A – THE NEW NORMAL: LIVING IN UNITY

Some things just belong together. **Salt/Pepper**. **Bacon/eggs**. **Men/women**. **Fish/chips**. **Rock/roll**. They fit. They make sense. There is a built-in unity! But then there are oxymorons...contradictory things that seem illogical together: Deafening silence. Jumbo shrimp. Military intelligence. Science fiction. Unbiased opinion.

Then there's the one Peter uses...**living stones**. Peter's description of who we are doesn't make sense. We might say stone deaf...stone cold dead... But never *LIVING STONES*. But if the resurrection of Jesus tells us anything, it's that God takes whatever we thought was normal & creates a new normal to fulfil his purpose/plan for the people he loves & the world he created for his joy by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. **BIBLES**

Remember, as Peter writes this letter & another soon after, he writes to churches like us in so many ways...being squeezed by non-Xn world to go along w/ the pagan values worldviews beliefs & attitudes surrounding them. Last week I asked **If** 21st century Australia wrote a new 10 Commandments, what would the 1st Commandment be? We all bounced around the idea of what sociologists/psychologists call today's prevailing mindset: **"expressive individualism"** Which means that any wish whim want or wild idea I burp out into the room is to be applauded & paid for by everyone else. Every crazy scheme or perversion that in your lifetime would have been shunned or shamed is now to be celebrated & paid for even by people who want nothing to do w/ it...the rest of us have to accommodate & celebrate. That's exactly the world in which Peter's letters were originally received...

Followers of Jesus were seen as a threat to the good order of society because of their "superstitious" refusal to worship Caesar as god-on-earth or as dangerous to the functioning of the universe because they rejected the sacrifices & festivals to the Roman gods. Remember: All non-Xn (pagan) faith is transactional: business deal... You give. You get. All non-Xn (pagan) faith is motivated by fear in the sense that bad stuff happens if you don't properly respect worship & sacrifice to the gods. Xns would not go to pagan temples, offer pagan sacrifices, participate in pagan sex revelry (which was just like the twisted sex revelry we see today)...so Xns were a threat to society. The gods might get mad & hit earth w/ hailstones or fire flood drought or plague...Or it saw rivers & mountains & the things of the earth as being indwelt by "spirits" that would rise up against us if we disturbed their habitation...or didn't show proper respect through the proper ceremonies...& Xns wouldn't & shouldn't. God the Father alone is sovereign...In Christ alone he rules the universe & by the Spirit draws all things to him for his purposes toward a joy & fullness nothing of this earth...no transaction can accomplish or supply.

So Peter writes to encourage & strengthen their faith in Jesus...reinforce the truth they've been taught so that in difficult times they don't give up *OR* give in *AND* so that their trust in Jesus...their relationship w/ him nurtures & sustains them & widens their influence in the world...multiplies the spread of the gospel & broadens the footprint of the church on earth as a foretaste, 1st glimpse, of the Kingdom of Heaven. Key point for Peter is that they/us...WHO WE ARE as a people... church...is anchored in something we didn't do.

God the Father knew you & chose you long ago, & his Spirit has made you holy... by God's great mercy we have been born again into a living hope, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead & into a priceless inheritance...beyond the reach of change & decay. God the Father, knew us, chose us, set us apart for his purposes by his Spirit, forgave our sin by Jesus' death/rez, brought us into new life in a living hope by raising Jesus from the dead & has set us aside for an eternity in his presence that can never fade perish, or spoil. **AND**...We've done **nothing** to earn, secure or deserve any of that.

If the question ever arises "Are you born again? How do you know that's true?" Yes, I/you have been born again, not because I/you chose Jesus Christ but because in Jesus Christ God chose us. In Jesus Christ, God chose you from ^b/₄ time for **all** time. And by the death/rez/rule of Jesus Christ, God delivered you from slavery to sin, grip of death & the terrors of evil into newness of life — eternal life. *All those who hear my word & believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for they have already passed from death to life.* - **Jn 5:24** already yours – living hope - Peter's encouragement to followers under-fire flows from the reality that the One who was crucified **FOR THEM** is now alive & ruling over all things in love...**IN THEM & WITH THEM.**

And because of that anchored reality...**You** are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honour. And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. *What's more, you are his holy priests.* Peter says...as we are drawn deeper into relationship w/ Jesus...as the Spirit leads us to him our lives are connected to his such that we are built up into a living house of worship & therefore: **Church** is not a place **we** GO it is who **WE ARE**. You cannot go to church. You are church wherever you go. You carry the presence of the risen Jesus by the Holy Spirit inside you wherever you are. **AND**

You are not alone in that choice/call of the Father. "People" "Priests" "Nation" "Possession" are all collective nouns...every "YOU" plural. As those who have been drawn into relationship w/ the Father through the loving sacrifice of the Son by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit we find our greatest fulfilment in proclaiming that good news to the world *UNITED* to other followers of Jesus. We will know we will experience no greater success - no higher joy - no larger satisfaction than proclaiming that good

news to the world all around us *UNITED* to other followers of Jesus. It is impossible to do that fully on your own. No one congregation can do that alone. It's impossible to do that fully/completely/acc to God's design by ourselves...which is why Peter says we are "living stones" PLURAL. He assures us we're stronger, wiser, more faithful together as part of the whole than as isolated individuals. Individual isolated stones are not a building. You will always struggle to be "church" by yourself not interconnected to the rest of the body of Christ.

Why do you think I resisted the lockdowns & lockouts so defiantly... On-line churching is not the full expression of church. On-line membership or worship in front of a screen is not the same. We can do amazing things via the internet...being church is not really one of them. We can talk, study, learn, pray...but I cannot touch, hold, hug, weep w/ you if I'm not w/ you.

Only together as church do we fully reflect the image of Christ to the world (show it in our lives by the Spirit's power). Only together as church can we fully express the grace we've received & expand the Kingdom of God's love/grace in which we live. As an individual you can touch individual lives & serve & witness & care compassionately...& you are called by Christ to do so...but only together as part of the whole body do we genuinely show the world the restoration, redemption & reconciliation w/ God & other people given to us in the *living hope* that is ours in Jesus Christ risen from the dead. Only together as church engaged in the world can we fully share the grace we've received & demonstrate to those around us the powerful love of the Father that has made us His own... "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp & then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." — **Mt 5:14-16**

Thom Rainer...who's been writing for years about the church & who has done some really scary research on why congregations die... "if you think Lone Ranger (go it alone disconnected from the body) Christianity is acceptable to God, you need to read the New Testament again." Huge piece of his research is that congregations die when we disconnect from each other...avoid worship, never get together w/ other Xns around Bible or prayer, outsource witness & service to someone else...think this is enough.

Quickly 2 things...1 — **Priests** — Most folks think that word applies only to me or someone like me...lots of training... years of study...a certain level of expertise...an exemplar of moral character unattainable & vastly different from you. Nonsense... Not acc to the NT. In the OT it was genetic...the priesthood was a blood lineage birthright. Family of Aaron chosen by God to handle the holy things of worship...sacrifices.

In the NT it's all of us. We are like the internet hotspot for the world to experience God's grace & the living word of hope in Jesus. We stand ^{b/4} God to pray for those who are still not yet part of his family. We stand ^{b/4} those folks as living witnesses to his Kingdom...love...healing forgiveness restoration & rescue. Rather than an inherited identity it's an imparted one. Paul would write *My old self has been crucified w/ Christ. It is no longer I who live, but **Christ who lives in me.*** Gal. 2:20 You & I now stand ^{b/4} the world around us clothed in the likeness & image & power of the risen Jesus Christ to bear his promises & presence in all we do. You are his priest.

2 **you** are living stones that God **is building**...The work isn't finished yet...We're a work in process. We're not done. Somewhere between a year & 93 years & counting & the work of the Spirit never stops. I keep raising the issue of our first 10 years together as LWF...& praying asking God for his blessing to lead the next 10/20/30? The work isn't finished in us yet...So expect mistakes...Lord knows I'm capable. That's not an excuse for the awful things that happen in the church now & again...but it is to say this isn't a place filled w/ perfect people...but people who are loved by the Perfect Saviour...who have been claimed in perfect love by the Father...built on the Cornerstone of all eternity...Cornerstone determines the size & capacity of the bldg.

Our capacity as God's people — His church — is infinite, endless. How can I say that? It's what we're promised...Paul to the church in Ephesus: *I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power **in us** who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead...* 1:19-20 We have an unlimited capacity to forgive...to serve...to love...for compassion...generosity...for bearing each other's burdens for hospitality for praying for one another for wisdom & witness. There is no limit to what the Spirit can pull off through us because we are joined to Jesus Christ by our baptism into his death & resurrection...because he has sent his Spirit to live & work in/through us. We have an unlimited capacity because we are in Christ...joined, connected, anchored unshakably to his life & love sharing his place as son/daughter of the Father. (no one can snatch us out of his embrace)

In the certainty of the risen Jesus we find our "new normal" in a unity that only exists in witness/mission to the world directly outside our doorsteps. We can never outsource our witness to our families, this city or the folks we encounter every day... **You** — all of you together — are the tangible presence of Christ sent to light up the world.

TAKE IT HOME — Where will you ask Jesus to shine through you this week?

Who will you invite to join you in making the light of Christ even brighter?
Let's pray with that in mind...