

Sermon Stott Radical discipleship week 6 balance

I can't imagine what it must be like to be a member of the royal family. The Duke of Windsor once commented about his disciplinarian father King George V, who, when The Duke did something wrong would say 'my dear boy, you must always remember who you are'. He was a royal prince and so must act accordingly.

On this advent Sunday, with its great themes of preparing for Christmas and waiting for Jesus returns, I wonder if we can ask ourselves the same question 'who are you'? Our reading today 1 Peter 2:1-17 gives an amazingly varied and balanced account of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, ready for his return.

Let's look in detail at this passage (bibles open?) and the words Peter uses to describe us.

Babies

I wonder how you feel (v23) being compared to a baby? Peter does this to reflect that we are born again – this isn't a phrase only on the lips of strict American evangelists – the reality is there are no non-born again Christians (see Jesus conversation with Nicodemus – John 3:7) – we either are born again, or we're not Christian. This isn't anything to do with our baptism either, but the deep inward radical change brought about by the Holy Spirit. But we do not emerge fully developed, no, like a baby we are weak, immature, vulnerable and needing to be fed. So Peter writes that we need to 'grow up' in our salvation (v2) and we do this by ridding ourselves of malice and deceit, hypocrisy and slander (v1) – these are babyish – but how are we to grow? Staying with the picture of babies, we need to crave pure spiritual milk – daily, regular feeding. It's something we might take on board this advent – instead of rushing around, focus on our spiritual growth in a new way – reading through Luke (24 chapters?), using a prayer app such as pray as you go?

Stones

The second picture (v4-8) is that of living stones. He moves from biology to architecture. We are a building under construction. It's the church. I often marvel at our great cathedrals built by the Normans – how did they do that? But of course, biblically, the church isn't the building, but the people. All over the world God is building his church, worldwide it is continuing to grow, particularly when Christians take God's word seriously and don't conform to the values of the world. Nothing can destroy God's church (Matthew 16:18). It has an eternal destiny. Stone by stone the building grows until the keystone is put in place and Jesus returns. How do we become members of the church – yes, by baptism, but Peter says (v4) come to him, to the living stone – Jesus Christ. In v6-8 Peter puts together a series of Old Testament texts on the subjects of rocks and stones. Christ is that living stone, rejected by Israel, chosen by God as precious. What is the implication of all this – it's that we belong together. Stones need mortar. Each is joined to the other. No stone is suspended in midair! What does Jesus mean to us – is he a stumbling block or the foundation stone on which we are building our lives? We are a community, and it's as we act as community we become attractive.

Priests

Stand up if you are a priest? Peter says we all are! This comes as a surprise to many Christians, yet we cannot avoid it. God has made us (v5) a holy priesthood, and (v9) a royal priesthood. What on earth does Peter mean?

In the Old Testament the priestly caste had two privileges – First they enjoyed real, close up access to God, in contrast to the rest of the people. The second is that they offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the

people. Only the priest could do these two things, the people could not. But now, in and through Jesus this distinction has been abolished. The whole church is the priesthood. Through Christ we now all have access to God (Hreb 10:19-22) and through Christ we all are called to offer the spiritual sacrifices of our worship. This is the priesthood of all believers so important to our reformed understanding of faith.

Of course, some Christians are called to pastor, to teach and to lead. I very infrequently use the title though of priest, Paul uses the word presbyter (elder) instead, as does the C of E in its ordination services. So why are we a 'holy priesthood' (read v5). So we are holy priests called to worship God, but are we to be so engrossed in our spiritual life, worship, fellowship that we forget others? What about the lost and lonely world outside our warm and cosy churches (sorry!) Don't we care about it? Peter says yes!

God's people

So to vv9-10. You are a chosen people, a royal people, a chosen nation, God's special possession. The church is a royal nation, his own. These are not illustrations Peter made up, but ones he gleaned from Exodus 19:5-6 where God said to Israel freshly redeemed from Egypt that if they kept his covenant by obeying his commandments. With the audacity given by the Holy Spirit Peter lifts these words out of exodus and reapplies them to the Christian community – you followers of Jesus, he says to you and me, are what Israel used to be – a holy nation, though now an international, intergenerational, cross cultural one. But why did God choose Israel – not because they merited it, but by God's grace alone, and in order to be his witnesses – not to keep the gospel to ourselves, but (v9) that we might declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Peter turns to Hosea, and says we were once not a people – we were once in darkness, but now we are in his most wonderful light (what a great Advent theme!)

So how can we keep all this to ourselves?!

So far Peter has likened us to

- Newborn babies, with the responsibility of growth
- Living stones, with the responsibility of fellowship
- Holy priests, with the responsibility of worship
- God's own people, with the responsibility of witness

Peter still has two more pictures to go... the next is in v11 (read)

Foreigners

The word means people with no rights where they live, exiles who have no home. It's easy to picture this as we turn to world events – but what does this mean for us? For Peter he was describing a literal reality. Many of those he was writing to had fled Jerusalem under persecution, and so were in other parts of the Greek/Roman world far from home. They were (1:1) the diaspora, scattered throughout the 5 provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia – mostly in modern day Turkey. But this also reflected their spiritual condition. Because of being born again into the kingdom of God, they had become foreigners and exiles on earth. They were citizens of two countries, but the primary one was that of heaven, and that means a call to holiness – there are duties as citizens.

The final image is that of

Servants

VV 12-17 describe us as conscientious servants of God. Peter urges believers to live such good lives among the pagans that they may see their good deeds, to submit to the secular authorities, to do good and so

silence the ignorant talk of the foolish, to live as free people without misusing their freedom. Instead to live as God's servants and to show proper respect to everyone – fellow believers, God, and the worldly authorities. Nevertheless – we still belong first to heaven, we are aliens and exiles on earth, we are pilgrims travelling home to heaven.

All this (as we've seen in previous weeks) profoundly affects our attitudes and behaviours towards money and possessions. Look again at v11 – our soul is on its way towards God, so we abstain from everything that might hinder that journey, and live a holy life in preparation for the holy presence of God in heaven.

Why is this chapter of Stott's book headed balance? Have a look over the headings again – it's beautifully comprehensive and wonderfully balanced. These six duties can be seen as three pairs...

We are called to individual discipleship and corporate fellowship

We are called to worship and to works of service

We are called to pilgrimage and citizenship.

If we focus too much on one, and less on others, the scales do not balance. Our Heavenly Father is saying to us, as King George V said to the then Prince of Wales – my dear child, you must always remember who you are, for if you remember your identity you will behave accordingly.'

May that be true for us as we begin Advent.

(reflective music?)