

1 Peter 2:1-10: People with Something to Say

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (v9).

Throughout history many have seen themselves as chosen by God for a particular purpose. For example, abolitionists, who were mainly Christians, believed they had been chosen by God to bring freedom and equal rights to slaves. Yet at the same time many slave owners believed they had been chosen by God to keep and sell slaves.

Peter explains why God has chosen us to be his people. He did not choose us to campaign for better human rights. He chose us to declare the praises, or more literally, the excellencies of God.

Some regard themselves as better than others because they believe they have been specially chosen by God. So Reverend Moon, the founding-leader of the Unification Church believes that the chosen people or Fourth Israel are those Jews, Muslims or Christians, who recognize that Moon himself is God's chosen Messiah. Rastifarians believe God has chosen the black race as superior to all other peoples both physically and spiritually. Afrikaaners believed God had chosen them to possess the land of South Africa and to treat black Africans as akin to the Canaanites of Old Testament times.

Peter tells us that God did not choose us so that we would parade our virtues as a superior people. No! He chose us to proclaim the excellencies of God.

Our great task as God's chosen people is to proclaim God's praises, or literally, his "excellencies" or "virtues". This same word was used by the great Greek poet Homer to describe excellence of any kind. For example, a fast runner displays the "excellence" of his feet. Homer also speaks of a son who surpasses his father in every kind of "virtue", as athlete, as soldier and in mind. Such "excellence" was not merely a quality possessed by an individual. For example, when a Greek exhibited the virtue of courage he not only brought glory to himself but to his household and community.

Virtue in the Greek world was never an abstract quality, never merely an attitude. It was because of *the actions* that he performed that a man was regarded as virtuous. When we proclaim the excellencies of God we are not spouting concepts about what God is like. We are telling people that God *has done things* that demonstrate his virtues. Indeed, our dignity and honour as the community of God's people arises from the virtuous actions performed by our God.

Take verse 9 out of its context it's easy to think that Peter is emphasizing our duty as God's people; that because God chose us he demands something from us in return; namely to proclaim his virtues to others.

But notice how our passage begins. We are a people who have tasted the goodness of the Lord and this has served to whet our appetite: *"like newborn babies long for the unadulterated milk of the word that by it you may grow up to salvation, having tasted that the Lord is good."* We want to experience yet more of the Lord's goodness

and so we have the craving of a healthy, newborn baby for milk, the pure spiritual milk of God's Word which reveals to us the Lord's goodness.

But you cannot behave like a newborn baby if you have not experienced the new birth. Was there a time when you tasted that the Lord is good? That is the outstanding evidence that you have received new life. The person who has new life loves Jesus. He or she hungers and thirsts for Jesus. There is no abating of that thirst. The healthy Christian remains like the newborn baby, longing to be fed on the milk of the Gospel, of the Word of God, so that he or she might know Jesus better.

Hunger is a mixture of "push and pull" motives. Our hunger is determined in part by push motives such as internal changes in blood, glucose or fat stores. Our hunger is also determined by pull motives - the foods available. Some foods are more desirable than others. When we become like newborn babes in Christ our whole inner being is reconstituted and our new appetites represent the push motives. Spiritually healthy Christians hunger to suck on the milk of God's word. But our spiritual hunger is also due to pull motives. The Lord himself is so desirable. When we first received new life, we tasted that the Lord is good, as Peter puts it, applying the language of Psalm 34:8. Others reject him, but we keep coming to him because we know him as the one "*chosen by God and precious to him*" (verse 4).

Peter speaks about all Christians coming to Jesus, the Living Stone. At the very beginning of this epistle Peter addresses "*God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout*" many regions. When Peter speaks of Christians coming to the Living Stone, he is speaking of a mass pilgrimage of all Christians. Every year a mass pilgrimage of millions of Muslims from all over the world travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. There millions of Muslims show their reverence for a black stone by walking around it seven times. Individuals try to get as close to the black stone as they can. Those who are able to do so, kiss the black stone. Muslims hope that they will experience God's blessing by showing reverence for the black stone.

This is foolish superstition. This treats a stone as if it had magical powers. But every Christian is also called to make a pilgrimage to a stone and show our devotion to that stone. But the stone to which we come is not a dead, lifeless stone. No! Jesus is the Living Stone, for Jesus' body does not rot in some grave. He is alive, **living**. More than this, he is the **living** stone because when we come to him we receive life from him.

Muslims reject Jesus as the Living Stone. For them the black stone is far more important and powerful than Jesus. They do not believe in a Jesus who died on the cross and rose again nor that he is the source of life. Peter says that Jesus, the Living Stone, is "*rejected by men*", that is, by all non-Christians, by all unbelievers.

We used to holiday at a place north of Taree when our kids were small. When we went bushwalking our kids gathered unusual, nice-coloured pebbles from stream beds. Occasionally they'd bring one home and put it in their room. But it just sat there. Most of the time they didn't do anything with it. They forgot that it was there. Occasionally they might pick it up and admire it, but I doubt even that. Non-Christians may think Jesus was a good man. Even Muslims admire Jesus as a prophet. But all unbelievers reject Jesus as the living stone, because none of them realises how precious he is. Peter says he is "*rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him.*"

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Do not treat Jesus like a remarkable pebble we once came across in a river bed somewhere. No, says Peter, it is a fatal mistake to fail to recognise Jesus' importance. Peter quotes words spoken by the prophet Isaiah, saying that Jesus is: *"A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."*

19 year old boys can be very foolish. I used to run down the stairs of the hostel where I lived, two or three steps at a time. Near the bottom I would leap 9 or 10 steps in one great bound. One day I miscalculated and caught my foot on the bottom step, spraining my ankle badly. The next day I came down those same stairs, hopping two or three steps at a time. When I got near the bottom I decided to hop 5 steps. But again I misjudged the distance and so was laid up with two sprained ankles.

Today I can look back at this incident and laugh. It was not very serious. However, there are many people who as they make their journey through this world come across a stone in their path, the Living Stone, Jesus. Many think they can jump over this stone and leave it behind them; that they can ignore Jesus. But, Peter tells us, when people try to step over this stone and ignore Jesus, they are making a serious error of judgment. They will stumble, they will fall and when they do they will not merely sprain their ankles. No! They will fall to their ruin.

We have not made this great error. As Peter says in verse 7: *"Now to you who believe, this stone is precious."* "Precious stones" usually refers to diamonds, rubies, very expensive jewellery. But Peter has Psalm 118:22 in mind: *"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."* To us Jesus is precious not because he is like a diamond we can use to show off how important we are. No! To us Jesus is precious because he is the foundation stone for the building which God is making. Without this stone this building could not be made. It is because of this stone, the Living Stone, that it is possible for us to be a part of God's wonderful building project.

God is building us "to be a holy priesthood" (v5). Peter teaches us, adopting the language of Exodus 19:5-6, that we Christians are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God". In Orthodox, Catholic and many Anglican churches outside of Sydney it is common for clergy to be called "priests". This is very wrong. Against this Peter reminds us that every Christian is a priest. Indeed, it is as a united people, cemented together like bricks in a spiritual house, that we "[offer] spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". Peter calls them "spiritual" sacrifices because it is now unthinkable, given Jesus' once for all sacrifice, for us to kill animals to present as offerings to God. But it is our inestimable privilege to come into the presence of God, laying on the altar before him all that we are and all that we have, in gratitude for what he has done for us.

As a boy in Scotland Peter Marshall once visited a friend but lost track of time and stayed too late. On his way home Peter decided to take a short-cut across the moors. Darkness fell. Lost and terrified, the young boy began to run. Suddenly he heard a voice call his name, "Peter!" He ran on. Again the voice called, "Peter!" Turning to see who was calling as he ran, he stumbled and fell in the darkness. Reaching out to raise himself, Peter touched nothing but air. Suddenly he knew where he was . . . at the edge of an old stone quarry. A few more steps and he would have fallen to his death. He always felt God had saved his life by calling out to him! God had a purpose for

Peter Marshall's life, to use him as Chaplain to the US Senate to declare God's praises as the one who had saved him not from a mining quarry but from the pit of hell.

When Peter speaks of our being chosen to proclaim the excellencies of God he means that we are to make known to others that God is the only Saviour. The phrase "to proclaim the excellencies of God" comes from Isaiah 43:21. There we read:

The wild animals honour me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

What does this remind you of? How, after being rescued from slavery in Egypt, God provided water in the desert for his chosen people. It is no accident that Peter portrays all Christians as exiles in this letter. Isaiah was speaking to God's people as exiles in Babylon, promising them that God will rescue them from their captivity and provide for them just as he rescued them from slavery in Egypt and provided for them in the desert under Moses. God does this for a people he has formed for himself to proclaim his praise as the one who has saved them.

That is what has happened to you and me. We were in bondage, bondage to a life of sin and rebellion against God. We were living in darkness, a life without God. God has sent us one far greater than Moses to rescue us. The Lord Jesus leads us and provides for us. We are now the people of God, formed to proclaim the praises, the excellencies of the one who has rescued us.

Scott Jones, an American diver, went scuba diving with an elderly lady in the Sea of Cortez off the coast of Mexico in 2003. A sudden water surge smashed her against rocks and killed her. Jones spent a harrowing night perched on the rocks. Crocodile hunter, Steve Irwin was in the area shooting a documentary. Hearing the SOS call on his radio, Irwin abandoned the film project. He found Jones, dehydrated and scarred, perched on rocks. Irwin, dressed in his trademark khaki shorts and shirt, dived in the water and swam across to save Jones. Following Steve Irwin's death, Scott Jones has testified to the world that Steve Irwin saved his life. He said, "We'd love to go to Australia and tell his wife and kids just what a great man he is."

Jesus has saved us from eternal death. God's Son left heaven's glory and became fully man, diving into the same troubled waters in which we live. But Jesus drowned in those same waters in order to rescue us. What is our response? We say, "We'd love to go to all peoples and tell all the families of the earth what a great person our God, our Rescuer, really is."

We do not communicate the gospel of God's excellencies because it is an obligation laid upon us. It is because of the excitement and joy we have because God has miraculously intervened in our lives and rescued us. We are like the honey-bee as it returns to its hive with food. The honey-bee is an extraordinary creature. It performs a dance to communicate to other honey-bees the direction (relative to the Sun) and distance (as far as 6 miles, 10 kms) that they should fly to reach the source of the food. We have tasted that the Lord is good and we want others to enjoy the delight of knowing him as well. And so we communicate to others where to go to find the food for their souls for which they hunger.