

St John's Dedication Festival

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Dedication Festival – 1 K8 22-30, Ps 84, 1P 2 4-10, Mt 7 24-29

Sometimes when you visit a special place in the Holy Land, a fragment of Scripture will come alive for you in a new way. One such place for me is a little chapel inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (*Eastern churches call it the Church of the Resurrection*). This ancient church was built around 326 CE by St Helene, the mother of the Emperor Constantine. It was built to enclose two important sites.

One site is the one that gives the Church its name, the Holy Sepulchre. Originally a cave was cut into the wall of a disused quarry, and bought by Joseph of Arimathea to serve as a family tomb. It's the tomb he gave to enable the hasty burial of Jesus.

The other site is very close by. It's a rough rocky outcrop that was left over in that disused limestone quarry. It was left there as it was useless for building material. Tradition places Jesus' crucifixion on the top of this crumbly, fissured outcrop – a highly visible place just outside the city wall. And it's still there to touch and to see. You can touch the top of the rock from inside a chapel built above it. You touch the stone by crawling under the altar and reaching down to it through a hole in the floor. And downstairs in a small, dimly-lit chapel, you can see its base lit up through a window set into the wall. Pilgrim groups walking the way of the cross stop here for the tenth time to remember Jesus being stripped of his garments before his crucifixion. And the scripture they read is one we heard this morning. *The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.* 1 Pet 2.7b – Ps 118.22

Those words in *that* place. Jesus was the stone rejected by

empire builders – people who built on the sand of their own ambition and pride, their selfishness and their cruelty. But Jesus rose from the dead, from a rock cave to be revealed as our cornerstone – the foundation on whom we and everyone and everything stands.

Today we gather in this much smaller, much younger stone church to give thanks for the hundred and eighty-one years of worship and loving service Christians have been able to offer here, and to affirm again that Jesus is our one foundation-stone.

Our parish family began its life here as St John's in the Wilderness. But with time, things have changed. For many years now, we've been St John's Halifax St., a central-city parish. How have we navigated this change; how have we responded faithfully to what this calls from us? Our foundation, Christ, has always been our guide. His love and acceptance offered to the poor, the lonely, the sick and the troubled have remained our standard. Our mission has become more complex with the passage of time. The needs we are called to address keep growing.

Years ago, we responded to these growing needs through the establishment of St John's Youth Services, and by entering into a covenant with the Cathedral, St Mary Magdalene's and Anglicare in order to nurture and manage the Magdalene Centre.

But now both SJYS and TMS have grown up, and despite the strong ties that still bind us, they've left us with something like empty-nesters' syndrome. Painful as that is, it's a good thing. We can celebrate the wonderful work our kids are doing out in the world. But we can't relax. So what's next? Many of us are very active as individuals in voluntary community work. But as a congregation – a parish – what's our next project? How do we imagine ourselves as *the body of Christ* – as we say each week – embodying Jesus in a community where, in the post-Covid and climate-changing world, needs and crises are greater

than they've ever been?

We're empty nesters. One of Michael Leunig's cartoons depicts an empty-nester couple sitting in their calf-leather recliner-rockers in front of a magnificent home-entertainment unit, each with a large glass of red in their hand. And there's an embroidered sampler on the wall proclaiming their new motto: *'We have overcome'*.

Have they shut the world out? *We* can't be like that. We have a founder whose example defines our mission as one of active compassion and an accepting hospitality right to the end. We know that we are called to follow Jesus, walking the way of struggle together with each other and with all in need. Today's hymns, psalm and readings remind us that the blessings we enjoy are inextricably linked to Jesus' model of compassion and radical hospitality. They say the only way we can live with integrity is to be firmly founded on Christ's example *all our lives*. There's no retirement age for a follower of Jesus.

We're experiencing our call to mission in the world in a different way from earlier generations because the place we have in the hearts of the wider community is steadily deteriorating. It's as though we're coming to be seen in the way the builders saw that old rocky outcrop in the quarry back in Jerusalem; no use for building anything. Many can't see us as relevant to anything in the modern world.

Rev Andrew's irrigation installer asked him, 'So whaddaya do for a crust?' Andrew replied, 'I'm a minister in the church.' To which the irrigation installer scratched his head in bewilderments and exclaimed, 'Geez Mate! There can't be much call for that any more!'

The local community care we once offered is increasingly managed by corporate agencies; no longer so much through humble parish relationships with locals. But we have gifts that corporate agencies can only dream of. The stone that the

builders might reject can still be revealed as the head of the corner by our response to Jesus' call. We still offer the millennia-old *sanctuary* of life-long friendship and protection. We still offer life-long belonging in a family *community* whose first principle is loving acceptance and hospitality; and we still offer life-long companionship on the *pilgrimage* that each person travels. Corporate agencies, eat your heart out!

Particularly here at St John's, as part of our community care, we treasure beauty, culture, creativity, thinking, art, history, literature and music. All of these are under growing threat as a utilitarian world-view poisons our governments against supporting creative people in need, or funding the study of the humanities and social sciences. Again, as in earlier dark ages, this Church – the stone the builders would reject – we can nurture and preserve these gifts of civilization which, like creation herself, proclaim our Saviour as the creative, redemptive giver of all life, beauty and meaning

So what are we going to do next? I'm seriously asking for suggestions from each of you. Building on our strengths is a good start, but how? Over to you.

Amen