

The Methodist Church: Bradford North Circuit

Church Without Walls – a 30 Minute Meditation

Preparation

During this time of reflection you will be invited to consider how it was for the early church, which had no dedicated buildings as places of worship, a bit like what it is like for us now, being church but unable to gather in our buildings.

Remember that anywhere that you choose to mindfully spend time with God is hallowed ground, so find yourself a quiet, comfortable place to settle.

You may wish to light a candle or battery tealight to symbolise the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Take a few long, calming breaths and drop your shoulders, consciously relaxing any parts of your body where you are aware of carrying tension.

Of course, you may spend just as long as you wish with this meditation but 30 minutes is suggested as a comfortable period of time to allow.

Reading

1 Peter 2: 4 – 9 **The Living Stone and a Chosen People** (*New International Version*)

As you come to him, the living Stone—
rejected by humans but chosen by God
and precious to him—
you also, like living stones, are being built into a
spiritual house to be a holy priesthood,
offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God
through Jesus Christ.

For in Scripture it says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”*

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious.

But to those who do not believe,
*“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”*

and,

*A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

They stumble because they disobey the message—
which is also what they were destined for.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God’s special possession,
that you may declare the praises of him
who called you out of darkness
into his wonderful light.

The Jerusalem Temple

You may have seen a picture of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was the focus of worship for Jewish people. The original Temple took seven years to build, and was an impressive building with much gold decoration, carved cherubim, palm trees and flowers, a bronze altar and an inner sanctum housing the ark of the covenant. After the Exile and the return of Jews to Israel, the Temple was rebuilt, and later King Herod extended it to include an outer courtyard, inner rooms and altar, all lavishly decorated.

Temple Worship and Perfect Stones

There is almost an aside in the account of the building of the first Temple, in 1 Kings 6:7 that says: “In building the temple, only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site while it was being built.” (*New International Version*)

- Think about what that meant.
- Only perfect stones were brought to the temple site and used.
- What might that have said to ordinary people who came to worship?

Jewish people could worship at their local synagogues but for festivals they came to Jerusalem, which was the only place where sacrifices could be offered. We see numerous references to this in the gospels throughout Jesus’ life, starting with his Presentation in the Temple in Luke 2:22-40.

The New Temple

Now think about those to whom St Peter’s wrote: believers in far-off Asia Minor (roughly where Turkey is today). Followers of Jesus from a Jewish background would have put great emphasis on the importance of regular attendance at the Temple to make ritual sacrifices to be put right with God. But now they had no Temple building to visit to participate in the time-honoured rituals, no priests to make the prescribed sacrifices on their behalf.

Peter reassures these believers that they do not now need these things. Instead of beautifully dressed stones being made into a temple building, they themselves are ‘living stones’ being built into a new spiritual house, for offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.



A Spiritual House

St Peter talks about believers being *living stones...built into a spiritual house*. He assures his readers that they themselves, working together, supporting each other, “building” on Christ himself and offering the sacrifices of faith and obedience, are put right with God.

Reflection

How do you think the early believers felt about not having a building as a focus for their religious rituals?

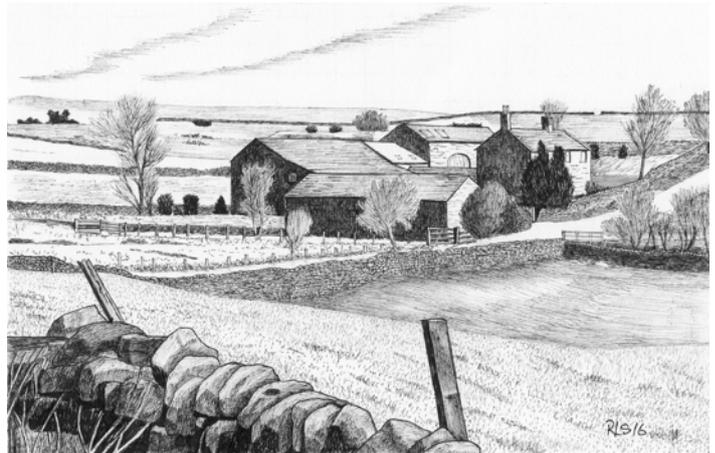
Imagine you are one of those followers of Jesus, reading St Peter’s letter to you for the first time.

- What stands out to you most?
- Is there anything that speaks to you about our situation now?

Take a few minutes to re-read the passage as you ponder these questions.

Dry-Stone Walls

In this part of the world we are richly blessed with dry-stone walls running across our landscape and we can use them to help us understand what Peter was expressing, even though he was talking about the walls of a *spiritual house*.



Living Stones

In her poem entitled *Living Stones*, Marjorie Dobson imagines building a dry-stone wall, from different shapes and sizes of stone.

Some stones were never meant for building,
being sharp and flinty;
jagged and easily broken.
Unreliable.

Others are round and smooth.
They slip and slide, one against another:
never bound together.
Always moving.

Some are oddly angular;
seeming solid,
but with edges worn away
by time and circumstance.
Misshapen.

Others are easily damaged:
vulnerable and fragile,
chipped and scarred
and in need of protection.
Unstable.

But, in the hands of experts,
every stone is placed
in dry stone walls.

They stride across fields,
the weak, misshapen and vulnerable
providing the central core
to the stronger, larger outer stones,
patterned together
with skill and knowledge.

No stone the same,
but all are useful.
Needed.

And if the wall is damaged,
the builder will return
to pick up pieces
and re-shape and build again.
Reassuring.

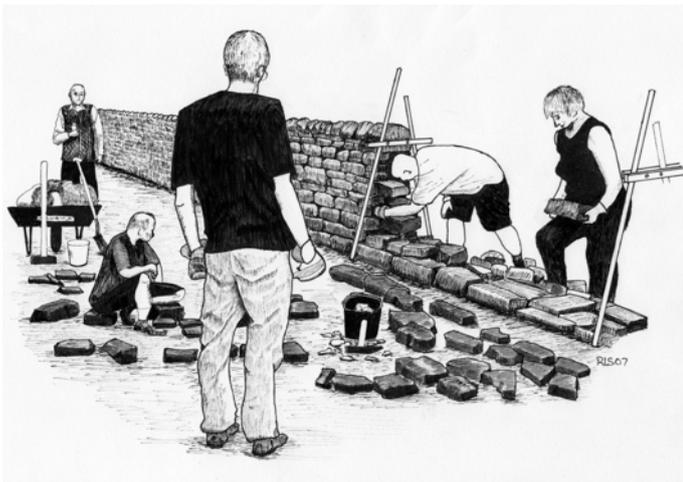
©Marjorie Dobson (By permission)

Reflection

Which (if any!) of the stones Marjorie describes do you identify with?

Look carefully at these two images of dry-stone walls.

- Where might you imagine your “stone” to be and why?
- Are there stones with rough edges that are making it difficult to be where you are?
- Are there stones that have an important place in your wall, which, if removed, would lead to collapse?



- What are those ‘essential’ stones – people? Or rituals, habits, fundamentals of your faith, etc?
- How have you felt the support of other stones around you at this time of lockdown?
- Does your wall feel like it needs rebuilding?
- How have you felt the shaping and building of God in these days?

Now take some time to speak to the one who is both the cornerstone, and also the builder, whose Love holds all things together.

Prayer

Dear God,

We are living through uncertain times
where many things in our lives that we felt
were as solid and secure as a dry-stone wall
have shifted on their foundations.

But you reassure us
that the most important things in the world
are those that are unchangeable
– love, trust, faith, compassion and hope –
and that all these things are built on you.

This world is constantly changing
and one day will not exist as we know it,
but we have your promise that your love
will never end, and we rely on that.

Help us to live and build in this world
on the values of your kingdom that is to come.

Give us guidance as we involve ourselves
in our everyday dealings with other people,
especially in these days of social distancing.

Grant us your peace,
particularly when the future appears to be
unpromising
and hold us in your love, whatever happens.

And as we pray in the knowledge
that your love never fails,
we ask that you will be with those we know
who are in particular need today...

Let your presence be evident in all these situations.

Let all the people affected feel your power,
your strength and your love
– covering them, enfolding them,
and building them up.

Grant us all your peace and hold us in your love.

In Jesus's name we pray.

Amen.

Rounding off your Meditation

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

Singing the Faith 351 – CCL: 129818 (TMC)

<https://youtu.be/oKJfs8C14yc>

Close your time of reflection with this wonderful hymn by Stuart Townend:

In Christ Alone

Sung by the National Methodist Choir of Great Britain –
a virtual choir for our Church Without Walls.

For more information on the choir visit

<https://nmcgb.org/>