

Please note that this is a written version of the video reflection rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
and is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

*Psalm 118 .22 - 24
(and quoted by Jesus in Matthew 21 .42)*

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Sunday 4th October 2020. Those words of our Call to Worship, taken from Psalm 118, will crop up again in our Gospel reading.

I'm back in Pelsall today, where I was born and brought up. This immense stone is often the subject of conversation around here. Nobody knows what it is or why it's here. It's clearly been 'worked' and you can see the marks from that. At some point in its history it's been abandoned here, 'a stone that builders rejected' perhaps. A reference to the second part of our Gospel reading today More about the stone after our Opening Prayer.

Let us pray.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God,
when we grab and hold on to
what we believe to be ours, and ours alone:
Challenge us.

When we reject your Word because
it challenges us in uncomfortable ways:
Forgive us.

When we fail to accept the forgiveness
that you offer us in Christ:
Be patient with us.

When we fail to be patient as we struggle
to respond to your love:
Be with us, in Christ, we pray:
Amen.

Mike Claridge

Some people say this is a coffin stone. Coffin bearers would rest the casket here while on the way from the station, just over there, to the church just over there. Maybe it was here anyway and it was useful for that purpose anyway.

Others says it's a gravestone of a horse! Either belonging to the local Vicar or a drayman - which sounds a good combination anyway.

No body knows how long it's been here. My dad remembers it being here pre-war.

Myself? I guess its a water trough that's been abandoned here upside-down. Whatever it is it's clearly been rejected and abandoned.

Jesus speaks of a 'rejected stone' later, but in the first part of our Gospel reading we have a parable, a story, with more murder than an episode of *Midsummer Murders*. As in the previous two weeks it's set in a vineyard - a vineyard being a frequent image for the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 21 .33-41

33 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

What's odd about that vineyard? What are many churches celebrating around now? Harvest. What's odd about the vineyard is that there is no harvest. There are no grapes mentioned until right at the end. The wine press stands empty, the tenants haven't been productive.

This is one of the few parables that is pure allegory - most aren't, this one is. God's people are supposed to be producing fruits of love, righteousness, justice and peace. But they aren't. Time and time again we - for we are the tenants - have rejected God's messengers, often violently, historically often fatally. This is the same rejection of God's purposes that led to the rejection of the Son - of Jesus. Matthew presses the point home. Jesus was thrown out of Jerusalem and killed, just like the son in the parable.

There are no grapes, no fruits of love, righteousness, justice or peace. It is time for a new tenancy.

Matthew knows about the crucifixion, but also he knows about the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. He knows that in Christ we can be a new creation. We may have been the old tenants, but we are called to a new life. We have another chance to produce that harvest of love, righteousness, justice and peace.

Let us unclench our fists that have threatened God's messengers and sought to hoard what we believed was ours. Let us open our hearts to the new life that will bring fruit of God's Kingdom.

Let us pray:

So much for so little (based on Matthew 21 .33-46)

Loving God,
you have given so much and ask so little -
a loving heart, an open mind,
and a willingness to accept others.
Why then do we try and hoard your love
in clenched fists,
protecting our place and fighting our corner,
when all the time
your love is unconditional and generous;
a love that surpasses boundaries,
and invites us to welcome all.

We know when we are limiting your love
through our words and actions,
and yet, somehow, we cannot help ourselves.
Strengthen us to walk the way of Jesus,
allowing his message of love
to transform our lives,
and open our hearts to love you more.

Loving God, you have given us so much;
may we respond with generosity and love
for you and for all people.

*Heather Whyte - URC Minister, Luton and Dunstable Pastorate
taken from 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020.*

'The stone that the builders have rejected'. The second part of the Gospel reading today begins with a quote from Psalm 118. We used it as the Call to Worship today. Here it again now as Jesus pointedly directs the parable he's just told, to his opponents - the religious leaders. They are rejecting him - but they will themselves be rejected.

Matthew 21 .42-46

42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:
"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?'
43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given
to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this
stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The whole point of a cornerstone was that it was the reference point from which the rest of the building would be constructed. It's angles needed to be true and its alignment accurate. Measurements and angles for all further walls would be taken with reference to. Until surveying tools advanced in design, a true cornerstone was important if what was to be built was to be sound and stable.

The leaders that rejected Jesus' teaching and ministry. Soon they would reject and kill him! But they would discover that what they were rejecting was indeed a true cornerstone. Jesus Christ; cornerstone, reference point, foundation and head of a new vineyard where fruits of love and righteousness, justice and peace will flourish.

Let us pray:

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone.
chosen of the the Lord, and precious,
binding all the Church in one,
holy Zion's help for ever,
and her confidence alone. Amen

*From a 7th Century hymn
translated by John Mason Neale (1811-1866)*

Closing remarks

We have been offered a new place in the vineyard. That Call to Worship from Psalm 118 reminds us we are part of a new beginning, a new day, grounded on the new Cornerstone of the Kingdom of God.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
and is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118 .22,23

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next week there's a wedding and, topically enough, there's a problem selecting who should be on the guest list.

For now, take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!