

“Rock Solid” – 1Peter 2:2-10 – Easter 5 – May 22, 2011

I'm delighted to see you all here this morning, especially after all the fuss in the media about the “Day of Judgment” that was predicted to occur yesterday. I suppose perhaps we might check to see who isn't here, and follow up to see if they are still deeply embedded amongst us sinners. Apart from the avid followers of the cultist engineer who, in spite of having been demonstrably wrong in 1994, encouraged them to spend tens of millions of dollars – in some cases their entire life savings – to promote his “vision of the end” I'm not sure how many took it all seriously. There were of course the usual flood of jokes not only on the traditional media such as radio and television but especially on the internet – where as one wag put it, “people are cracking rapture jokes like there's no tomorrow!”

Such predictions of an imminent end of the world and the accompanying flap are nothing new. For example the Mayans roughly a thousand years ago identified the year 2012 as being the end of all things – although sadly for the Mayans the demise of their society came a lot sooner than that and so they won't see their prediction fall by the wayside.

We can see some evidence from the New Testament that many early Christians eagerly awaited the “Second Coming” of the Lord, expecting it to happen if not next week then surely during their own lifetimes. They were deeply concerned about how to live as Christians while waiting (you are familiar I'm sure with my own favourite – “Jesus is coming: look busy!”) Paul advised those eager anticipators to chill a bit and not to make any rash lifestyle changes in anticipation- “if you're married, stay married; if you're single, stay single” and other pieces of good advice.

Not all questions of how to live as Christians were and are as burning as those asked while nervously looking over one's shoulder to see if Jesus is cloud-surfing, but the issue of how to live as Christians is nonetheless a foundational one. One of my favourite theologians, Miroslav Volf, highlights the inextricable link between beliefs and practices in a book he co-edited with Dorothy C. Bass titled, “Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life.” In a few minutes I'll talk a bit more about his views, but for the moment hold with me the idea that our beliefs shape our practices and our practices also shape our beliefs, and perhaps more importantly our practices – which are visible – reveal our beliefs, which are not.

The author of the letter we call 1st Peter seems to have understood this concept clearly and is urging his readers to put that knowledge into practice. My study bible claims the congregations to whom the letter was written were “composed mainly of Gentile converts” citing verses 1:14, 2:10, and 4:3; however, I believe instead that Peter was targeting lapsed Jews living in Gentile territory (the “exiles of the Diaspora”) who had become Christians. My main reason for this is the extraordinary number of times that the Jewish Scriptures (what we today call the Old Testament) are alluded to in our brief reading, images that would evoke echoes of Scripture for Jewish believers but not necessarily Gentile converts. (The images evoke memories of Psalm 34:8, Psalm 118:22, Isaiah 28:16, Isaiah 8:14-15, and Hosea 2:23.)

In any event, whether Gentile or Jewish converts, these new Christians were clearly experiencing some serious persecutions, most likely under Nero in the mid-to-late 60's and are being urged in this letter to respond by living a life that would reflect the grace that was shown to them by God in Christ's death, resurrection, and in the promise of his coming revelation. Which is a fancy way of saying that they are being urged to exhibit practices that are consistent with their beliefs. There seems to be a concern that they are lapsing into former behaviours of licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry, and the thrust of

this letter is to urge them that since “the end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers” (4:7).

Which brings us back to today, when once again however briefly the subject of the end of all things is front and center in our society. Horrible persecutions against Christians are still in evidence: Emmanuel and Bushra Cheema, ministers in our Asian Christ Church in Surrey, have just returned from Pakistan with eyewitness accounts of churches being burned and innocent people slaughtered because of their Christian faith. We see in the media similar atrocities happening in Egypt. Here in Western society the attacks are much more subtle but even more pervasive. Perhaps the most effective attack on modern Christianity in the West has been the use or mis-use of the understanding of the link between beliefs and practices. Over the past one hundred years we have seen a shift from a Christian faith whose belief engendered practices of social justice to the forming of a general belief in society that the practice of “doing good” is adequate and sufficient. The natural result of this shift is to change the very foundation of the practices, from a belief in Christ to a more rationalistic philosophy drawn from the “Age of Enlightenment.” Consistent with this shift is an ever-increasing belief that somehow spiritualism is an individual phenomenon, that one can be ‘spiritual’ in isolation – some eight out of ten people here on the West Coast express it as “I’m spiritual but I’m not religious.”

The author of 1st Peter addressed his particular concerns in a way that is also relevant set against our situation today. “Like infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” The ‘spiritual milk’ refers to the Word of God in scriptures – of course the specific scriptures referred to here are the Old Testament, a link immediately reinforced with the allusion to Psalm 34. As we’ve noted before, many scriptural citations and allusions follow one after the other in quick succession. The images are mixed, so much so that one could say even confusing, but perhaps we can put that down to enthusiasm – a spiritual house being built of living stones; then a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices; Christ is the rock of destiny, precious and chosen to those who believe but to others a stumbling block; and finally a people who were once not a people.

But there are a couple of consistent themes intertwined throughout these images. The first is that Christ is the rock-solid foundation of spirituality; the anchor without which spirituality comes adrift and floats here and there and everywhere. For the chronicler of this epistle there can be no real spirituality without Christ, the one who is precious in God’s sight. But just as important is the second thread which is that spirituality is communal, not individual. Spirituality is about action (practices) joined together – coming to Christ the living stone to be in turn built into a spiritual house – the church. The reason for that coming together is to offer spiritual sacrifices – not burnt beef nor cloudy incense but one’s very self, and the only way to do that is through action, through practices. The spiritual practices that are touted as obvious today come immediately to mind, such as prayer, and meditation, and fasting, but here the scope is much broader. Here the spiritual practices include not only abstinence from “passions of the flesh” but more positive practices that are summed up later in Chapter 4 – “above all hold unflinchingly your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace ... in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”

This is the practice of spirituality in community. As Marjorie Thompson puts it in her book, *Soul Feast*, “I prefer to begin with a more biblical phrase, ‘the spiritual life.’ Scripturally speaking, the spiritual life is simply the increasing vitality and sway of God’s Spirit in us. It is a

magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit, moving us toward communion with both Creator and creation. The spiritual life is thus grounded in relationship. It has to do with God's way of relating to us, and our way of responding to God." (p.6) She goes on to claim that spirituality is the way in which we realize the spiritual potential within us, through the choices that we make – choices of belief, value commitments, patterns of life, and practices of faith that allow Christ to be formed in us.

While this is an understanding that is very similar in some ways to Volf's as I mentioned at the beginning, there are some crucial caveats, or understandings that need to be clear. Volf firmly establishes the link between Christian beliefs and Christian practices, and argues that each affects the other. But he claims that "the role of beliefs, though immensely important, is secondary. The whole Christian way of life, with all its practices, is supported and shaped by something outside that way of life – by *what God has done, is doing, and will do.*" (p.254, emphasis mine). For Volf it is critical that we understand that Christianity is not primarily about human doing – it's not a case of looking at Christ and imitating a wholesome way of life, but rather about receiving both yourself and your world as a new creation in faith. Christian beliefs are more than just norms or guidelines for how we are to live, they illuminate the divine action by which human beings are constituted as agents of practices. Using the Lord's Supper as an example, Volf contends that if all we do is ritually commemorate the events of that night we are profoundly missing the point that Christ's body was given and his blood spilled for us and for the life of the world. "The Lord's Supper is a sacramental representation of the gift of new life through Christ's death and resurrection – new life whose reality underlies every single properly Christian act and therefore all Christian practices." Moreover, we should understand that we are not simply the fortunate beneficiaries of God's embrace in the sacrament, but should indelibly understand that "inscribed in the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents."

So, how do we become "living stones being built into a spiritual house"? By understanding ourselves as human agents of God's grace, not in the priestly sense of dispensing forgiveness but in the way of offering ourselves as spiritual sacrifices, by spiritual practices of offering love, and hospitality, and employing our gifts for the good of our fellow humans, that God may be glorified in everything we do through Jesus Christ.