

Job Description

“So what do you do?”

This can be a dreaded question in social settings when people don't know my profession. In many situations saying “Well actually I'm an Anglican priest” rather changes the mood. You should try it sometime. Usually people look a little guilty and usually try to change the subject.

But today I'd like to ask you that question “So what do you do?” not in general but in relation to the church. You might like to think of your answer. Perhaps attender, bible study leader, brass cleaner, these days video editor. There are a variety of job descriptions.

In our reading today from 1 Peter we are given what should be our job description. Peter says to his readers and to us “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.”

Giving that as an answer would bring most conversations to a halt!

But we are all priests in the Church.

As we seek to understand this flurry of images we will see that Peter pictures us as babies, building blocks and ultimately ambassadors.

BABY – FED WITH PURE SPIRITUAL MILK

Firstly, we are to picture ourselves as babies. Peter says “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation”

Here is an immediate challenge to all of us however spiritually mature we are we need to grow into salvation, God's coming kingdom. Do you think about growing in your faith, or do you think you've arrived?

This challenge is underscored with the idea of thinking of ourselves as newborn infants. It is of course a beautiful image of nurture, but it is also a challenging one of need. The infant needs the milk. We will not grow if we do not recognise our need. If we are to grow, we need then to be humble.

It may also mean that we need to do a spiritual inventory putting of unhelpful attitudes actions. We do this remembering that the Lord is good, or it could be translated “kind”. If our tastebuds are soured by malice and envy we will not truly taste the goodness of the Lord.

But what is this pure spiritual milk? Some translations do the work for us by translating this as “pure milk of the word.” The pure milk being equated with Scripture. Now, it is of course it good for us to come to God's word, the Bible, but we can push this a little further.

When Peter says “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” He is quoting Psalm 34:8 which speaks of tasting the God of Israel. But as we read on in 1Peter he continues “Come to him, a living stone”, clearly now thinking of Jesus. So Peter as says taste that the Lord is good he is doing something quite astounding, he now thinking of “the Lord” in terms of Jesus.

We see a similar pattern in the quotes from Scripture which follow. Peter is rethinking the whole story of the Old Testament, of God's dealings with his people, his purposes for creation, in terms of Jesus.

So the pure spiritual milk is not simply “The Bible”, it is the God's word read through the lens of resurrected Jesus, having fully tasted of God's goodness, kindness and mercy in the gospel of Christ. Indeed the word here for kindness is *chrestos* which certainly sounds a lot like *christos*.

So what do you do?

What are you doing to grow? I hope this gives you a taste and you will long for this pure spiritual milk so that you can truly grow.

BLOCK – BUILT TOGETHER

In startling mixed metaphor Peter moves from a cradle to a construction site, and to the rather puzzling image of a living stone. But in this picture we see something of what growing into our salvation means.

Peter is using an image that Jesus used of himself as the cornerstone despite being rejected. (Matthew 21:42). Jesus is now vindicated as chosen and precious in God's sight through the resurrection, hence living stone.

We come to him also now living stones, having been given new birth through the resurrection, and, as will become clear, also chosen and precious. In so doing we are built into "a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

I'm in a building which is full of stone, it is a thing of great beauty set apart for the worship of God. Yet the building that God truly wants is of living stones, you and me and all believers offering spiritual sacrifices. The truly beautiful things in God's eyes is not a Cathedral but a community of faith doing his work.

Also, unlike this building currently this is a building it is always open, all are welcome, to all who will come go Jesus, the foundation, in so doing the became part of the great building program.

This image is powerful reminds that growing into our salvation is not an individual thing, it is as part of a community. So while it is good to be able use this technology to speak to you now we long to be able to gather again, wherever it may be, Cathedral or community centre, hall or home.

Peter is well aware that while all are welcome not all will want to enter such a spiritual house, they will reject it and scoff at it. You can imagine that the original readers may have felt vulnerable as they had no temple, no other trappings of religion and would have been mocked by others in their community.

Peter uses Scriptural references to remind his readers of the biblical pattern of rejection followed by God's vindication is one that Jesus experiences and his readers will share. But their vindication is sure, note "whoever believes in him will never be put to shame." They are truly chosen and precious.

I think this raises an important question for us. Do we have as high a view of the Church as this passage does? Yes the Church both as an institution and as individual congregations have failed in many ways. But we should not give up on the Church, God hasn't, it remains central to his purpose and the church is and we are chosen and precious.

Does that challenge your thinking about Church?. You and your fellow believers are chosen and precious? Do you treat them that way?

The Scriptural references also clearly show that the ultimate stumbling block is Jesus himself. His very centrality is the controversy.

Here is another challenge. As we think about our Churches we need to understand that the ultimate stumbling block to faith is Jesus himself, accepting him as Lord. Our Churches the need to be clear who Jesus is, the foundation, the cornerstone.

On February 19th, 1817, the Foundation stone of the first St. David's Church was laid on this site. The Rev'd Robert Knopwood said "We shall consider Christ. His Doctrines are the foundation of our Faith. His Life is the foundation of our Practice, His Promises is the foundation of our hope." Long may that be true for this Cathedral and all our Churches.

But we also need to make sure that there are no other stumbling blocks put in the way, either through bad practice (remember the comments about malice and slander), or confused or wrong messaging.

So what do you do?

Or perhaps better what do we do? Are we letting ourselves be built into such a spiritual house, with our lives and communities based on Jesus the one true foundation. If the Church is not founded on Jesus, and growing to be like Jesus it is not a church.

AMBASSADOR.- DECLARING GOD'S PRAISES.

On this basis, as those growing into salvation, living stones being built into God's spiritual house we get to our job description in v9. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

Peter piles image upon image of God's people in the Old Testament to now describe believers in Jesus. To these scattered socially lowly readers this is an almost incomprehensible change of position, from the gutter to God's people, a privilege we now share.

Some of the language may be difficult for us to grasp, or seem to religious. Perhaps the idea of an ambassador may help. An ambassador represents and communicates those things that are important to their home nation to the peoples which they are sent. And they live in that nation representing their home nation in all they do, and to speak well of their homeland. We, as the Church, are God's ambassadors, his representatives, to this world, a nation of priests.

This also help us to grasp what an extraordinary honour and privilege God has given us.

But there is not just privilege there is proclamation of God's mighty acts, and in these two verses we get a great reminder of some of them, all with Old Testament echoes. God has called us out of darkness, he has made us his people, he has given us mercy. Our wonder at these things should lead us to praise his name. The seriousness of not having these things, darkness, separated from God, not receiving mercy, should lead us to proclaim them to all.

What is this proclamation, what has early been described as a spiritual sacrifice? In reading 1 Peter is in the whole of our lives as individuals and a community. It is similar to the idea of a living sacrifice from Romans 12. But we are also to be ready to give a reason for our hopeful and different lives. So in word and deed we proclaim God's gospel of Jesus Christ.

So what do you do?

Now I can be fairly sure that there will be some here who will be letting this slide by them, thinking this is for someone else watching, it is for those who are younger, or older, those who know more, those with stronger faith, those with greater gifts.

Did you notice however that there is no such option given in this passage. Peter does not say "Some of you are a royal priesthood, a good number of you might be a holy nation" It is something that is true for all Christians, all who are in God's light, now part of his people and been shown his mercy. If that applies to you, if you know his salvation then this is your job, and my job.

If you are older you may be able to demonstrate Christian hope more clearly than those for whom death seems a long way off. If you are struggling with the faith you may be able to show someone that Christians are not "know it alls", who have switched their brains off. Part of the understanding of the priesthood of all believers is that this role of representing God to the world belongs to each and every one of us.

Actually, it is stronger than that, there is one description that I have missed out, it is chosen. We are a chosen people. And this is not a slip of Peter's tongue or even pen. Peter has described his readers as the elect (1:2), as those called by God (1:15).

We have been chosen by God to fulfil this role; we have been headhunted from darkness to be God's representatives.

There is then no way to escape this description, it is what we are to do and be as God's chosen people, brought out of darkness specifically to spread his light in word and deed. We are God's chosen representatives, to praise him for his salvation, and to live lives that reflect that same hope, ready to share as we have occasion.

So what do you do?