

In the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

What a difference a year makes, eh?

Thank you for the lovely services, messages and gifts when Poppy and I left Formby – they overwhelmed us and we left with your love, if not your presence. As you can see though, we're back! And it's great to see you all.

I was recently over at my parents for my Mum's birthday. It was a big birthday, with a 0 in it. Similar to the one we were forbidden to celebrate with a certain Vicar...Moving swiftly on...

You know at these type of family gatherings when you see old family friends, and start reminiscing after catching up with what's new? We had a moment like that – where my brother and I were groaning at the memory of a family holiday when my Mum (geography A-level) made my Dad stop the car, get out, and look at some interesting rock patterns. Now, I like history – you may remember - but even to me, it was the next level of dull when the sea, sun and sand beckoned.

Our epistle reading today is like that excursion. While we're all waiting to resume our lives after lockdown, we are given a reading about being living rocks. Which makes no sense – on the surface – especially given the plans we have to make and holidays we have to re-book.

Yet, we're encouraged to be living stones in our epistle reading today.

I found my first sermon from St Peter's the other day. The illustration was a brick from the Bier House extension. Just take a breath, pull your minds back and think about how far we've all come since then.

In that sermon, I noted that stones that are dependable and reliable. Who, without losing their strength, can be re-shaped for a new building. Living stones, then, sounds like a contradiction in terms, and it should be.

It's designed to make us think deeply, and be that stumbling block to superficial logic that Peter mentions in our epistle. Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Peace Prize winner, musician & medical missionary put it like this:

"The demands of Jesus are difficult just because they require us to do something extraordinary. At the same time he asks us to regard these as something usual and ordinary".

If you are wondering where to start, then the people we can see most easily in church are the stories and lives of the saints – both departed and living.

All of these changes are results of what Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction". This is what Peter is on about in his epistle – encouraging a church in it's faith. He starts by calling it milk. In other words, start small and build up.

Going back to our foundations can help us see how best to build for the future. It help us re-think our foundations in the light of the experience we have gained since we took them to heart.

I would suggest we see more of that each time someone is stuck up for; forgiveness offered – for yourself or others, or good deed done.

There are times when it feels hard. There are a fair few interesting characters in our graveyard – I remember trying to bring some back to life in Voices from the Churchyard. There are also even more interesting characters in our pews. Over the past year, some of those characters have vacated their pews forever. It would be easy to feel the weight of history and a kind of expectation to meet their standard or do better.

G.K. Chesterton once described this as 'the democracy of the dead'; and we need to remember that part of our inheritance in this place is an ongoing purpose of being present and active in the world that we live in today.

Re-using or re-shaping stone is not incomprehensible to us. It has been done in the walls around us and the people around us too.

If you ask most people which is the oldest part of St Peter's, they say the chancel. It is actually the main body. The chimney, heating, and now roof, have been replaced and updated with materials that will see them go further. They aren't the original, but are still St Peter's. The Bier House was extended to fit more people, but is still the Bier House. Things are adapted and re-shaped to serve their purpose better.

Being a living stone is to be steady but animated.

In church language, we call this 'formation'. We see it in the Bible – powerful truths and ideas being shaped and re-worked over time to provide foundations for new circumstances. We read it this morning in the words of our epistle, Peter recalling Jesus' teaching and bringing in other bits of scripture from Isaiah and Hosea to help strengthen faith's foundations.

Eugene Peterson describes this as imagination being harnessed by faith. Being living stones is not a pipe-dream. He writes: "hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion or fantasy to protect us from our boredom and our pain. It means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what he said he will do."

A living stone is in the here and now; and what is more, it has God in it. God is active in our buildings if he is active in us, and in the people that sit next to us, and also those that pass through the doors of our halls and gates of our churchyard. It is built upon the chief cornerstone of Jesus Christ; whose words and example hold the same power and influence they always have, however familiar and comfortable we become with them.

Faith, then, is messy and slow, but so is building work. I remember Steve painfully going over a snag list even after the Bier House was finished. It's gritty, and detailed, and brings its own frustrations – as you will know if you have had any building work done on your houses.

Yet, it is necessary to make sure the work is done well and serves its purpose. By formation, by looking back and hoping for the future, we each build up our faith, this building, and each other.

Stopping to look at some rocks on the way to a holiday might not seem like the best use of time – when the sun and sand were calling; but it did (eventually) give me the sense of a bigger picture.

This Consecration Sunday may be the same for us. Think about all that has been this year and ask what can you take forward that will help your faith.

If you would like a criteria for it, you can look no further than the words of Jesus in our gospel reading: "At my Father's direction I have done many good works. For which one are you going to stone me?". If that is our defence for our actions; it seems pretty solid to me.

Not only for our own works either. Remember that old African proverb: "If we want to go fast, go alone; if we want to go far, go together". We saw that in the England team last week. I saw it during my time as your curate.

See how far you have come and be bold about where you are going.

This consecration Sunday, each of us are living stones that are released, restored, refashioned and renewed by others who follow the same Jesus, who forever calls us from darkness into the ever-emerging light.

May God bless your hands and hearts for all you are to build together.

Amen.