

11th May 2014

1Pe 2:2-10 "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to Him, the living Stone—rejected by men 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 capstone," and, "A stone that causes men 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, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Sermon

Both of our readings are full of encouragement, but also raise questions for me concerning the nature of my relationship with Jesus. The Gospel records Jesus saying that His sheep hear His voice and Peter talks about tasting that

the Lord is good. In the previous chapter he says “you love Him ... and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” We are very good at reading familiar passages and simply passing over them, so I thought this morning I would share a little of my own journey of faith, not to present myself as a model Christian, but rather as a thoroughly muddled Christian who has nevertheless found Jesus to be quite wonderful.

Religion is a strange thing. Some people like it some people don't. Some people find security in tradition or in a stable set of beliefs, or in the community associated with their chosen religion. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I seem to be completely insensitive to holy places and religious experiences. Even a visit to the Holy Land left me unmoved. I have to conclude that I am fundamentally not the religious type.

I am so grateful that you don't have to be religious to experience God in a personal and life-changing way. Peter says, “Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” I really enjoy a tasty meal and I occasionally enjoy a small piece of cake. Tasting and craving is an evocative description which we can all identify with in relation to food, drink, good company and a host of other pleasant things.

But what about the Lord? Have I tasted the Lord? How do you taste the Lord?

Earlier in the letter Peter wrote, “Through Jesus you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”

That describes the intellectual aspect of our faith: We believe what Jesus showed us about God, as described in the Gospels; “Through Jesus you believe in God”. Furthermore, we celebrate His resurrection as evidence of His victory over the devil and of God’s power to raise us up to eternal life. And we believe that Jesus reigns as King over all things and will come again to judge both the living and the dead.

Yes. I believe in God. But believing is not the same as tasting and craving. I believe in Einstein’s theory of special relativity, but I don’t exactly crave it! There is more to the Christian faith than believing. Peter described it like this:

“Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy”.

That sounds more like tasting and craving. Love is something we taste and crave, and so is glorious joy. Now here again, I think I need to be honest with you. I have struggled with both of these. I really don’t know if I love Jesus or what exactly is meant by that, and I find it difficult to sing songs that talk about how much we love Him. Perhaps I am too conscious of my failings towards Jesus and think that any protestations of love are somewhat hollow. So I am profoundly grateful that by far the greatest emphasis of scripture is not our love for God but His love for us. But I can say that I value and treasure and admire and respect Jesus, and I want to be more like Him and more obedient to Him, and I want to know Him better. If that counts as love, then so be it. I think I can say that I have tasted that the Lord is good.

Then we come to inexpressible and glorious joy. Again, I seem to be particularly thick skinned. I've been to many Christian events where the Holy Spirit has been moving powerfully upon people with everything going on from tears of repentance, tears of joy, uncontrollable laughter, people falling down unable to move under the power of the Holy Spirit, and I have been left standing feeling absolutely nothing. I once visited a church in Toronto which for many months had been experiencing a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I was determined not to miss out on what God was doing, so I was the first to arrive for the 7pm meeting and the last to leave. At 4am I was the last person standing – all around me were the bodies of people who had fallen under the power of the Holy Spirit. I was very put out! Like I said at the beginning – I just don't seem to be able to tune into religious experiences.

Nevertheless, I have experienced inexpressible and glorious joy with Jesus, where I have felt ready to burst with uncontainable joy. These have mostly been when I've been on my own – out walking or praying. But those times are somewhat rare; perhaps every 10 years or so. The most recent was about three years ago when Jesus started to speak to me about healing which as you know has led to some pretty extraordinary experiences both here and in Liberia. The rest of the time, joy is not exactly inexpressible, but it is nevertheless there. It does not take too much to think about my Father's love for me and Jesus owning me as His brother and the Holy Spirit's watchful presence in my life to bring a smile to my face and a great sense of security to my heart. I suppose this is a glorious joy – it is certainly

something I cannot imagine living without. Perhaps I have lived with it for so long I do not appreciate how glorious it is. You certainly do see inexpressible and glorious joy in people when they first come to faith in Jesus. That is where you see the contrast between life without Jesus and life with Him.

So yes, I suppose I love Jesus to a rather poor degree and I have an abiding joy in God that sustains me. But when I read these passages in Peter's letter I am left feeling rather deficient. But I know that Jesus loves me and is with me so I don't worry too much and move on. So let's come back to our epistle reading:

“Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.”

Yes, I have tasted that the Lord is good - but do I crave pure spiritual milk? Well here again I seem to be rather deficient. I'm rather undisciplined, so if a disciple is supposed to be disciplined, then I fear I am disqualified. I have periods of seeking God and wanting to grow in my faith and periods when I just get on with the business of life. I'm inconsistent. If I were a baby needing milk I would be dead! But to my continuing astonishment, Jesus has never given up on me and He seems to stir me up from time to time and shovel another spiritual meal down my throat. I am no advert for a fine disciple of Jesus. I am an advert for His incredible and persistent grace.

So yes, I have grown in my faith in recent years and hope that I will continue to do so. I certainly feel that I am still on a fairly exciting journey of discovery after being a Christian for

more than 40 years. I wish I were a more consistent and more Christ-like believer – but I am profoundly dependent upon and grateful for God’s grace.

The rest of the passage in Peter thankfully shifts the focus to what God is doing with us:

As you come to Him, the living Stone ... 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. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

This is a wonderful passage which lifts our gaze from our own deficiencies to God’s amazing Grace. We see here that God does not look at believers as miserable sinners in need of His daily mercy, but as a “chosen people, belonging to God”.

Now just consider creation: what does God delight in? Rubbish, chaos and confusion or beauty and order and life? When God chooses us to be His people, He does not think of us as a rag-bag of hopeless sinners but as a royal priesthood and a holy nation. When I look at me I see a hopeless sinner, but when God looks at me He sees a beloved child. When I look to Jesus I see the blood shed for my sins. When Jesus looks at me He sees a brother of whom he is not ashamed! I do not know how God manages to see us like this, but it is clear from the scriptures that He does. And I fear that we give too much attention to our view of ourselves and not enough to God’s view of us.

Who are we when we gather on a Sunday morning? Let's be honest! We all have our funny ways, and we don't naturally all get on well with one another. We are thrown together by our common faith, not by social choices. But God says we are "living stones, being built into a spiritual house". God's house is full of funny little nooks and crannies – you decide whether you are a nook or a cranny! But it is in those nooks and crannies that troubled people find a place of comfort and security. I'm so glad that God's house is such a very interesting place with room for each of us.

But we are not just a spiritual house, we are a holy priesthood. Not just Hilary, but all of us. Hilary is a priest in the Church of England, but every believer is a priest in God's house. And holy priests at that! When we approach God in worship or prayer, He does not examine us and find us unworthy. He sees us dressed in robes of righteousness; the righteousness of Christ. If we doubt our worthiness to approach God, we are not being humble; we are being proud and unbelieving. We can never approach God in our own worth. We can only approach because of Jesus, and His righteousness is perfect. Our boldness reflects our confidence in Jesus alone.

But we are not just a holy priesthood, but also a royal priesthood. We are specifically appointed to approach the King Himself. We should not be praying to saints to intercede on our behalf. Even Jesus Himself said that we should address our prayers directly to the Father. Every believer can approach God with boldness and in confidence knowing he

will be warmly received. You are a Royal Priest appointed by God Himself to bring Him your prayers and praise.

The devil would like us to be pre-occupied with our failings and short-comings. If we must come to God then he wants us to come grovelling and pleading for mercy and to go away feeling bad about ourselves. And that of course is one of the caricatures of the church portrayed by the media. But that is not what God wants from us. He wants a people who are alive with His joy, bold in their approach to Him and confident in their prayers being heard and answered. He wants a people who are courageous in faith, courageous in love, courageous in mercy and forgiveness.

How can that happen? By each one of us knowing that God is with us and for us. You are God's chosen people, a Royal Priesthood in whom He delights. Do not let fear and doubt and your own failings rob you of your place. Fight the fight of faith and stand with your brothers and sisters as Royal Priests. Let His delight in you fill your heart with joy and peace.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. Those who put their trust in Him will never be put to shame.