

I wonder, where’s your favourite place in the world? That’s probably a hard question to answer – I would certainly be hard pushed to give you my one all-time favourite place, but in the top 5 would be the **City of Florence**. Many of you will know I studied Renaissance Art, and as part of my studies I first visited Florence in 1992. It is a breathtaking city, full of so many wonderful treasures. Walk down one street and discover the small chapel with Ghirlandaio’s Last Supper. Walk into the main square and be confronted by Michelangelo’s David, 18 ft high, standing guard over the city. From the statue of David, you can walk on round the corner to the Uffizi Gallery, or turn to face the iconic dome of the cathedral (the Duomo), a miracle at the time of 15<sup>th</sup> century engineering.

Walk on past the Duomo and down a few sidestreets and you will eventually find a less well known Museum, the Accademia. In here you will find the original David (outside one is a copy). Turn the corner in the museum and you will find these (**SHOW PICTURE until ‘...the block of marble’ \***). Carved by Michelangelo, known as the ‘4 slaves’, and probably my favourite sculptures of all time. Michelangelo was once asked how he created his wonders, and he said that inside each block of stone there was a person. All he had to do was to chip away the excess and reveal what was already there. And here it is. **Living stones** – each one a person, revealing themselves from the block of marble \*. Only Michelangelo left them unfinished, almost to show them in the midst of creation, trying to set themselves free. Almost more beautiful than finished works aren’t they? **Living stones, in the process of creation.**



As we continue our series in 1 Peter today, with the theme of The Lord’s House, I want to suggest that *this idea of living stones is our key phrase* – because this house is built of living stones: (vv4-5) ‘As you come to Jesus the living Stone, rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house.’ Peter calls Jesus the living stone in v4 and says we are to be like him in v5 – ‘like living stones....’ What does he mean? That’s our key task for today...

**So firstly: Jesus ‘the living stone’.** This would have been a particularly special phrase for Peter – think about the name given to him by Jesus: Cephas, meaning ‘Rock’. Jesus says to him personally and directly: “on this ‘rock’ I will build my church.” But Peter recognises his authority rests on one much greater – he points us to *The Rock, The living stone, Jesus himself.*

But why this image? Well, it has a long history in OT, a long connection with God. Back in Exodus God meets Moses directly on that great slab of rock called Mount Sinai. A few chapters earlier, God provided for his people by bringing water from a rock (another living stone). King David was first to use the name for God directly, in his song of praise in 2 Samuel 22: ‘the Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer.’ It became a common phrase in Psalms – God as a rock. Secure, immovable – something immense, powerful, something which protects us, something we can trust. So the idea of God as our rock was born.

And when Isaiah prophesies about the greater one to come, he uses this idea again, which Peter himself quotes in v6: ‘See I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone. **Christ is our cornerstone – the one on which everything rests.** Most church buildings have a cornerstone – the single most important stone in the building, the one from which everything else is built. Not necessarily the biggest, but most important. ‘Build your house on the rock,’ Jesus says in his famous parable – and as Peter tells us, Jesus is that rock.

But he takes the image further, doesn't he? He adds a word. This rock is not just an inert block of marble. It is a *living* stone. Not a stone to be messed with, that's for sure: (v8, another quote from the Old Testament) 'A stone that causes people to stumble and rock that makes them fall.' But ultimately, Christ as the living stone points us back to the resurrection: this great stone is alive! – and we have come to him, and know him now to be our Rock, our fortress and our saviour.

But the image doesn't stay there, does it? **It's not only Christ who is the living stone: we are to be like him, like living stones.** Now we see the image in more detail, don't we? What is Christ the cornerstone of? God's people. Here the image sharpens to reveal the temple, the place where God dwells among his people. Only it's not the temple in Jerusalem anymore. We are the temple now. God dwells among us as his community – hence we are called 'the body of Christ' – and God dwells in us individually by his Spirit. So we too become living stones. What does that mean? Well, here's some ways that Peter draws this out in the rest of the passage

**'Chosen by God'** (v4b). *Never forget that before you chose God, God chose you.* He thinks you're special, he didn't make anyone else like you. What you do matters to him. But even more, *who you are* matters to him. He needs you in his wall, his temple.

**'Rejected by humans'** (v4a) – this is the hard bit, isn't it? Not everyone will like us. We march to the beat of a different drum. We have to learn to find our security in Christ and not in others. As I quoted recently, psychologists will tell you: 'You are what the most important person in your life thinks you are.' If that's God, then you can withstand anything. We can be the **holy nation** Peter talks about in v9 of the passage. As we saw last week, 'holy' means set apart – not a clique or a huddle, but called to lead a different life, to declare God's praises through our lips and lives.

**'Beacons of light'** – or to use the words of v9, calling people into God's wonderful light. Think of each our stones as more like jewels – reflecting God's light to the world around us.

**Royal priests** – this is so important Peter says it twice: a holy priesthood (v5) and then a royal priesthood (v9). I had a friend called Bob who worked as an evangelist. When people asked him if he was a priest, he said, 'No, I'm a royal priest!' If you're a follower of Jesus watching this today, then you're a royal priest too. What does a priest do? They're a go-between – representing God to people and people to God. But not for you lot in here. We're priests for that lot out there. *We represent them to God* – i.e. we pray for them we ask God to be in their lives. And *we represent God to them*: we love them, we help them, and we share our faith with them

As I close, let's go back to those sculptures (SHOW PICTURE until '*...like living stones.*' \*). If Christ is the true living stone, we're all a bit like this – on the way to being what we were meant to be. But not there yet. Like living stones... like living stones \*. What is God's word to you today? **What is God chiselling in you?** What will that mean for you? And may the Lord, the true living Cornerstone, fashion us all into living stones, building the Lord's House, for his glory, and his alone. Amen.