

Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

3rd May 2026

First Reading: Acts 7:55-60

Standing before the high priest and the council, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn 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.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight. Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Gospel: St John 14:1-14

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who

believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

from Rev'd David Higgon

In recent days the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury have spoken out over the death and destruction inflicted on the Middle East by America and Israel, the response of the leadership of America is to advise the Pope to stick to theology and morality, which is an interesting stance when Americans speak of God being on the side of America in this conflict. It is also worrying that the leaders of America and Israel don't see war, genocide, and the slaughter of noncombatants as having a moral dimension.

Faith leaders have spoken out on these issues since time immemorial. indeed in 697AD, a synod was called by Adomnán, abbot of Iona, with princes of state that produced an edict that fundamentally challenged the way warfare was carried out in Ireland and beyond. The Law of Adomnán sometimes called the Law of Innocents has been called the "first Geneva convention" because it was framed to protect non-combatants in war. Adomnán succeeded in getting the law accepted, and guaranteed by clerical leaders, and secular leaders, including the High King of Ireland and all other major Irish kings, plus two kings from Scotland, with fines imposed on those who transgressed the law.

The prospect of state leaders accepting the authority of the church today and agreeing to a similar Law of Innocents is very unlikely and it raises an interesting question of how do we see ourselves as church in this day and age. The Anglican communion of which we are part have all the trappings of a great institution, both in terms of its buildings and its bureaucracy, that can still commend the nation's attention when it comes to national commemorations such as the funeral of the late queen and the coronation, but it is no longer in a position of authority to influence world events, Some commentators speak of a church in crisis, with the churches diminished authority and declining church attendances. I wouldn't use such sensationalist language, especially when faced with the reality of a climate change crisis and an existential crisis facing some Christian communities around the world. In the middle east, in Palestine, in both Gaza and the West Bank , in Lebanon and in the Sudan, in places of chaos and dramatic change, Christians not only face persecution but also death and violence on a daily basis.

Our readings today remind us that people of faith from the earliest times have had to live through times of change and chaos and have had to face death and destruction.

Our reading from John's gospel is set at the end of the last supper; Judas has left the meal to betray Jesus and what is to follow is Jesus' death on the cross and his rising from the dead. This is a time when Jesus's followers were just a small band of women and men to whom Jesus gives his assurance that he will not abandon or betray them, that he will be with them always; Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled, to trust in him, to believe in him and to follow him so that where he is, we too may be where he is. To his followers, Jesus is everything, He is the way the truth and the life. They have nothing else to turn too, they are not yet a great institution with splendid buildings, they are a small band of people who have nothing except to be the people of the Way.

Move on some thirty or forty years, and Peter is writing to beleaguered communities of Christian Jews who have had to flee Palestine following the destruction of the temple by Roman forces in 70 AD and the ensuing death and enslavement of the Jewish people. These are refugees living in small, dispersed communities of Jewish Christians near the Black Sea , in what is modern Turkey. Peter is writing to forewarn them to expect yet more chaos, persecution and death. These are people of faith with no great institutional church to enfold them, their temple had been burned down and destroyed and Peter describes them as 'living stones', that make a spiritual house; a royal priesthood, a people set apart to sing praises to God.

When we see the destruction and persecution inflicted on Christian communities on Gaza, the West Bank, in Sudan, we see people who have no places of worship , people who are the living stones of the church in these places.

Some 300 years after Peter was writing, the church begins to be the institution that it is today. In that time Christianity radically altered the world view of the classical Greeks and Romans. It challenged a belief in heroic courage by exalting the humble and meek to become the very understanding of God, God in the person of Jesus Christ. It also held that God created the world out of love, a free act of gift giving and that we are not to take for granted the gift of the natural world; an idea which may well have been in tune with existing pagan beliefs.

God's creation and indeed ourselves are not possessions that we have by right or that we deserve, they are gifts of God's love and we are not to take them for granted but as gifts granted to us. Gifts that invite a response of thanksgiving and praise to God the creator.

Today things are greatly different from the time of Peter's letter, yet many people still seek a deeper spirituality but one that is outside of what is often described as 'organised religion', or more specifically, the Christian religion. I'm never sure where the boundaries lie between spirituality and religion but many people who see themselves as spiritual without religion, also see their existence as a gift given to them, even though they may not believe it to be a divine gift.

At the start of my sermon, I posed the question of how we see ourselves as church in this day and age. For me our vision and our vocation remain the same as it did to those early Christians. We are to live as Peter encouraged them to live, as citizen's today of God's Kingdom albeit that the Kingdom of God is yet to come. The Nicene creed reminds us that Jesus Christ will come again in Glory, to judge both the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. Christ is with us today , from the beginning to eternity we have his work to do. which may involve us in having to look beyond the edifice that the Christian church has constructed, it's buildings, its institutions, and its bureaucracies, to be the living stones of the Christian faith, a sacred priesthood who delight that we are gifts of love from God our creator. We may no longer be a church in authority over world affairs but we still have a moral obligation, together with leaders of other faiths to stand on the side of those who are the innocent victims of war and violence, to advocate peace and nonviolence, in a world where the leaders of the nations seem to have lost any sense of morality.