

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 25, 2021

Readings: Acts 4:8-12, Psalm 118:1,8-9, 21-23, 26,28,29, 1 Jn 3:1-2, Jn 10:11-18

by Deacon Robert Mitchell

Brothers and sisters the metaphors in today's readings – the cornerstone, the shepherd and the sheep – are ones we've heard often, and the risk is that they might, by familiarity and exposure, become bland. So let's open our hearts and minds and with a sense of wonder step into these scriptures and let them come alive for us in an intensely meaningful way. Because, let me tell you, these words contain a message with a power that dwarfs all the powers of man and nature – nuclear reactors, tornadoes, disease, even death itself pale by comparison.

In Acts 4, Peter says Jesus is “the stone rejected by you, the builders” which has “become the cornerstone.” He's speaking before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of elders, and he's calling their attention to the many places that the cornerstone metaphor is used in the Hebrew scriptures – Zechariah, Psalms, Job and so on – as well as echoing the words of Jesus himself when he refers to himself as the cornerstone. Peter's trying to get them to see that everything they've built – the religion, the rules, its dogmas, its tasseled robes, holidays and customs, and even the temple itself – has been built with the wrong cornerstone.

The cornerstone is the first stone the mason places. In the ancient world, and animal sacrifice was made at the cornerstone, such as a lamb or goat, and often buried in the footing beneath the stone. Nowadays the cornerstone is ceremonial or decorative. A ribbon is cut rather than the throat of an animal, and the stone is marked with a date and an inscription rather than with blood. But in those days this was profoundly serious business observed by both Jew and pagan. Archaeologists have found buried animals and even humans beneath foundation stones all over the ancient world, from Europe to Megiddo and Northern Israel and Gezer in the mountains of Judea. Peter's words are loaded – he's rubbing their noses in their old behaviors for sure.

But what he's also doing is telling them in no uncertain terms, that by sacrificing Jesus they have laid the cornerstone of something greater than they can possibly imagine. And even more than that: “the stone you rejected has *become* the cornerstone.” The building stays intact! The cornerstone has been replaced. Your commandments? Keep them. Your holidays? Sure, keep them too. The temple? Great, fine, keep that too. But those things will only be meaningful

and fitly formed if they are set on a foundation of love, grace, humility, personal sacrifice, and all of the things Jesus teaches. Without the proper sacrifice and the proper cornerstone, the building – the religion – is improperly constituted.

In John 10, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.” This is directed at Jew and Greek alike. Both cultures were making burnt offerings and observing laws designed to create a transactional relationship with their God or gods. You make a sacrifice, and your God or gods smiles on you. Greco-Roman pagans had thousands of gods and goddesses which demanded sacrifices before every important activity. The crushing debt of continual public sacrifices is thought to have been one of the primary contributors to the fall of the Roman empire. And I think Jesus is saying, “Hey look, I don’t work for pay. Those Greco-Roman gods you’re praying to? They are hired shepherds and they work for pay. When the wolf is at the door, they aren’t going to stand by you. I will. They won’t.” I think he’s saying to the Jews, “See here, you think God will do what you want because you paid in observance of rules and laws? No sir, that’s not how it works.” I think Jesus is saying, “I’m the good shepherd – I sacrifice for you, not the reverse.” Jesus doesn’t cut and run when the going gets tough.

But that’s not it. There’s more coming. Jesus also says in John 10, “I have other sheep not of this fold, and these I must also lead. And there will be one flock and one shepherd.” Now this is where it really makes sense, and we begin to see why I believe these scriptures have been paired together. Because the cornerstone is where two walls converge, but most importantly it’s the point from which two walls *emerge*. The mason places the cornerstone first and then begins to build the first two walls of the structure. The two walls are the Jew and the Greek, the Christian and the pagan – the two flocks that become one and have one shepherd!

This is why in 1 John 3 we read, “Beloved, we are God’s children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” The cornerstone has been laid, and after 2,000 years we’ve only scratched the surface of what’s possible through Christ. The walls of the building are only just beginning to emerge from the cornerstone. What will it be like in its fullness?

We shall see brothers and sisters, we shall see!