

Followers of the Way

A peculiar people

Alice Jones, 28-09-25

1 Peter 2:4-11; Zechariah 3:1-7

When Lynda suggested this sermon title – ‘A peculiar people’ – I said that would suit me because I’m rather peculiar myself. But joking apart, we don’t generally want to be seen as odd by others. It feels too much like rejection.

It’s interesting that the word translated as ‘peculiar’ in 1 Peter 2:9, in more modern translations of the King James Version is rendered ‘God’s own possession’. This highlights the undeniable fact that belonging to God leads to rejection by the world, just as Jesus warned his disciples: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (John 15:18)

The background to our reading from 1 Peter is an experience from the time Peter spent with Jesus, which must have been one of Peter’s most special memories. When Jesus first met him, he had given him the name Cephas in Aramaic, which is Peter in Greek, meaning ‘a stone’. In the Bible, when God changes a person’s name, it means He has decided to change who they are and also their destiny – for example, Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah. God does it when He has great plans for a person. Later, Peter expressed his faith in Jesus by declaring, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responded by blessing him and saying, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

When we say someone is like a stone or a rock, we mean they are strong, resilient, calm, stable, reliable and immovable. The Peter who we got to know in the gospels wasn’t like this – he was impulsive and volatile, often unduly swayed by his emotions. But when Jesus gave Peter his new name, this implied that Jesus would change Peter from the inside out, to make Peter like Jesus himself, because the Rock is one of the titles of God.

By the time Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write this letter, he had indeed been changed by Jesus into a different man. Paul described him as follows in Galatians 2:9: “*James, Cephas [meaning Peter] and John, those esteemed as pillars.*” Peter really had become like a stone, and like Jesus who is the Rock and also the chosen and precious cornerstone. It’s clear from our reading that Peter had come to realise that this transformation wasn’t just for him – it’s actually what God wants for every believer. When we commit ourselves to Him, He will make us living stones too. He will make us strong, resilient, calm, stable, reliable and immovable; like Jesus himself. This transformation will enable us to overcome rejection from the world.

God promised Ezekiel this:
"I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people." (Ezekiel 3:9)

In his prophecy, Isaiah similarly said:
"Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame." (Isaiah 50:7)

In Revelation, Jesus uses the imagery of new names and living stones in the temple of God, to promise a glorious future in eternity for everyone who is victorious:

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it." (Rev 2:17)

"The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name." (Rev 3:12)

As living stones, we are not intended to remain in isolation from one another, but to be built together into a temple for God's glory, with Jesus as the cornerstone. We are also 'a holy priesthood' within this temple, 'offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ'. In spite of our individual inadequacies, together we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to worship and serve God in a way that gives Him glory, that He recognises as His temple.

So what does being part of God's holy priesthood mean for how we live?

We can learn about what was required of the Old Testament priesthood in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. It was a position of great honour and also of enormous responsibility. It's daunting just to read all the rules the priests had to follow. To get everything right would have required their full concentration at all times. If they did anything that compromised God's holiness, they could lose their lives, as happened to Aaron's two sons Nadab and Abihu, when they offered unauthorised fire to God. I don't know about you, but I am extremely thankful not to be a priest under these rules! Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light, but as he made clear to his disciples, the principles that underpin the Old Testament rules remain our basis. We are required to live by these principles just as the Old Testament priests were required to adhere to the rules. This is what Jeremiah 31:33-34 means:

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord.

*"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.*

I will be their God,

and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbour,

or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'

because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.
“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

Let’s look at four principles that underpin the rules for the Old Testament priests, and see how they apply to us today:

1. The primary role of priests was to glorify God. They worshipped God daily with fresh sacrifices, and they made sure that the fire on the altar never went out. Likewise, we are required to pray without ceasing and to ‘continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise’ as described in Hebrews 13:15-16: “the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”
2. It was essential that the priests kept themselves pure, so that the sacrifices they offered would be acceptable to God. They were held to higher standards than the rest of the population. James 1:27 sets the standard of purity for us: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”
3. The beautiful garments, designed by God Himself, that the priests wore weren’t just for them – the dignity of the garments enabled the priests to offer the sacrifices that God required to deal with their people’s sins and their own sins too. The priests were accountable both to God and to their nation, and they were required to make continual intercession for their fellow Israelites. Likewise, whatever gifts and whatever dignity God gives to us are not just for ourselves. We too are accountable both to God and to the people around us, and we are also required to make continual intercession.
4. The priests knew God’s law and could advise the people on correct conduct and settle disputes. Because, through God’s mercy, we have His law in our minds and written on our hearts, we are also able to give godly advice to those around us.

There are two interesting links between the Old Testament priests’ way of life and Jesus’ instructions to his disciples:

1. Once Israel settled in the Promised Land, the priests were not permitted to own any land themselves, but were amply provided for from the sacrifices that the people brought. In a similar way, Jesus instructs us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all the practical necessities of life will be given to us as well.
2. Once Solomon’s temple had been built, the priests had rooms within it for their special use. Jesus said “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?”

Being part of God’s holy priesthood links the Gentile recipients of Peter’s letter and all believers since, including ourselves, with God’s purposes for the Jewish people and the land of Israel. We are described as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” – descriptions that were originally given to the people of Israel. Jesus the “chosen and precious cornerstone” is laid in Zion, the location of the Temple. This is what it means to be ‘grafted in’, and it has serious implications for believers right

now, which even five years ago we could not have foreseen. The world is changing as Israel's enemies become bolder, and her allies are starting to withdraw their support. This regrettably includes our own government. Antisemitism is suddenly exploding everywhere. It feels like the beginning of the end-times scenario when the nations of the world will unite to fight against Israel, and will be defeated by the Lord Jesus when he returns in glory. Whatever happens, and no matter what the cost, we must remain true to our God-given identity as His priests and align ourselves with God's purposes, not the world's purposes.

At this point, let's turn to our Zechariah reading, which reiterates the message that God has chosen Jerusalem. The vision that Zechariah received from God about Joshua, who was high priest when the Jewish exiles were starting to return to Israel from Babylon, was firstly intended to encourage Joshua in the task he had been given.

Secondly, it points prophetically to Jesus. Joshua's name, Yehoshua in Hebrew, comes from the same root as Yeshua, the Hebrew name of Jesus, and means salvation. Though Joshua was high priest and wore the impressive garments of his role, in the presence of God he and his clothes were filthy. Only God could make Joshua and his clothes clean, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross about 500 years later – Jesus who is described in Hebrews 10:21 as, "our great High Priest who rules over God's people".

Thirdly, just as Peter's new name given to him by Jesus wasn't only for him but was also for all subsequent believers, Zechariah's vision shows everyone who has been born again what our situation is before God. In His great mercy, He has chosen us, enabled us to repent and trust in His Son Jesus, and He has made us part of His Kingdom of priests. But we still have a sinful nature, and in God's sight we look every bit as filthy as Joshua. It's only the borrowed robe of righteousness that Jesus gives us that makes us able to stand in God's presence at all. And yet we are promised the same wonderful future that Joshua was promised – as long as we remain obedient – in these words from Revelation 22:14: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city."

As with Joshua, the devil our adversary is constantly at our elbow, trying to distract us and hinder us from serving God as His priests. Sometimes distraction, from a continual supply of entertainment and things to worry about, is enough to choke the word and make it unfruitful. But the adversary will also provoke sinful desires in us which wage war against our souls. In 1 John 2:16, these are categorised as "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life". A sinful desire is likely to be disguised at first, so we don't recognise it as such. It may be for something that's not intrinsically wrong, but the desire will be abnormally persistent. Proverbs 27:20 says, "Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes." Matthew Henry wrote: "Natural desires are at rest when that which is desired is obtained, but corrupt desires are insatiable." Although a sinful desire may seem insignificant at first, it won't stay that way. Unless we deal with it quickly, it will grow, and the bigger it gets the harder it will be to remove. The sequence of events is described in James 1:14-15: "each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it

gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Everything the adversary does is designed to be a slippery slope.

I experienced the slippery slope myself a few years ago. This may sound rather trivial, but Jesus did tell us that whoever is faithful with very little will also be faithful with much. There was such a battle over this apparently small matter that I believe it was a lot more important than it seemed, and fundamentally it was about obedience.

I have always been prone to what John called ‘the desire of the eyes’. It’s not wrong to appreciate beautiful things – after all, they’ve either been made by God, or through the creativity God gives to human beings. It’s true that God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. But trouble comes if our focus slips from God to the things He gives, or if we try to keep them for ourselves.

Anyway, a few years ago I started to feel that God wanted me to reduce the amount of stuff in my home, and specifically things that were overly ornate or kept for ornamental purposes and not used. At first, I tried to ignore this feeling and reason it away, but eventually God confronted me in an unavoidable way, so I started to remove items and donate them to local charity shops. Among these items was an antique plate, hand-painted with designs of fruit. (As I was writing this, I suddenly realised the significance of fruit in the temptation context!) A few months later I happened to be looking around the same charity shop, and I saw the same plate. Clearly no-one else had wanted to buy it, and I rather regretted handing it in. I stood there debating whether to buy it back, and part of a verse from Proverbs came into my mind – not one that’s often quoted: “a dog returns to its vomit” – and I’m sure we all know the rest of it: “so fools repeat their folly” (Proverbs 26:11). That made me uncomfortable. But, as it says in Jeremiah, the heart is deceitful above all things, and I immediately constructed an alternative theory that God had caused no-one else to buy the plate because He was OK with me having it back. I’m ashamed to say that I did go and pay the few pence they were asking for it, and then on the way out of the shop I saw two other items that closely resembled things that I had, with difficulty, given away previously. I realised that this was a slippery slope designed to make me undo all that I’d previously done in an attempt to be obedient to God. I was quite rattled, but believe it or not, I still didn’t hand the plate back. It took several weeks of feeling uncomfortable before I finally re-donated it. So you can see just from this example that God has been extremely patient with me!

Looking at anything that appeals to us without maintaining a godly perspective can be the start of trouble. Proverbs 17:24 says, “A discerning person keeps wisdom in view, but a fool’s eyes wander to the ends of the earth.”

It’s a sobering thought that the whole aim of the advertising industry is to make our eyes wander to the ends of the earth so that we’ll spend money on things that we think will satisfy us. We’re surrounded by more advertising material now than ever before in history. We are also surrounded by images that aren’t overt advertising, but which encourage us to dwell on what is seen and temporary, rather than on the far more important things which are unseen and eternal. But it’s worth remembering that we also have more access to the Bible, Christian literature, online teaching resources and recorded worship than people have ever had before. We can choose, every moment,

whether to put God first or the world first. James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." Whenever we take a step towards God, He comes closer to us and blesses us. We need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

In Romans 12:1-2, we are urged to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, and this is described as our true and proper worship. It requires an act of will on our part to stop wanting to conform to the pattern of this world, and this opens the way for God to renew our minds so that we'll know what His will is, in order to be able to do it. Psalm 119 verse 11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." It's up to us to pay attention to that word when it confronts us, if we start to go astray.

We need to involve God in everything that goes on in our minds. When we pray for people, we start to see them as God does, not as the world does. Romans 13:14 says, "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." If we become aware of anything in our lives that might hinder our relationship with God, we need to be strong and deal with it immediately. In the words of Proverbs 4:15: "Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way."

The stakes are high. We might feel insignificant in ourselves, but as God's priests our prayers are important. I'm sure we have all had experiences of amazing answers to prayer, sometimes very quickly, sometimes years later. These are the prayers where we can easily see the answers. So I believe it follows that God will have answered many other prayers we've made, where we can't expect to see the answer for ourselves, particularly our prayers for the salvation of people's souls. We may never find out, at least not in this world. But we know that God wants people to be saved far more than we do, because He loves each person more than we ever could, and He doesn't want anyone to perish. God wants to use us in the vital process of saving people's souls, but in order to be used by Him we have to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world. We owe this firstly to God, and secondly to our fellow human beings. It is a constant battle that requires us to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. It's tough, but absolutely worth it.

Let's finish with these encouraging words from 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."