

Living Stones
by
Fr Paul Bresnahan

It was in late August of 2005 and my son David called from New Orleans. He had limited access to the news and asked me what I knew about Hurricane Katrina. It was still days away from landfall but I was glued to the Weather Channel as I often am. Many clergy fancy themselves amateur meteorologists. I told him "David, listen to me very carefully; you are in the very center of the cone of predictably." Then I said to him with a note of authority; "David, this is your father talking; get out of there! ASAP!" Thankfully he did evacuate with some of his friends and sought shelter with other friends in Atlanta. Sometimes it is entirely appropriate that you come right out and say who you are!

Who do you say that I am? I like to say that I am "just a simple parish priest." My dear friend, Bishop Brookhart got a little tired of hearing me say that, so he made me an honorary Canon to the Diocese of Montana. So now I say that I am "just a simple Diocesan Canon." Another friend told me that makes me a large caliber, big bore! You folks have made me the Interim Dean of St Peter's Cathedral and you are making it difficult for me to maintain my simplicity.

But then along comes my namesake, Paul and in today's Epistle he reminds us "not to think too highly of ourselves" but "to think with sober judgment". Each of us is gifted in many ways and Paul enumerates some of them. The list he provides is not exhaustive, and he proclaims that the reason for our giftedness is "to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,"

You do know you are holy? You are acceptable to God, do you not? One reason we gather as One in Christ Sunday by Sunday is so that we can be at God's table and present ourselves to receive the Sacrament, forgiven and full of the Grace that God intends for us.

Look how many gifts you bring to God and to one another: Paul continues; "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."

We will need all of these gifts and more besides, in the face of history; whether the kind inflicted upon us by nature or humankind.

We are in the midst of a dry season with many wildfires here in Montana. Folks On the gulf coast, are in the midst of one of the most dangerous

hurricanes to hit the United States in more than a decade. It will take all our gifts working together to be a spiritual sacrifice to God; fire fighters, rescue personnel, first responders and good neighbors. So many prayers are needed. Prayer means much more than muttering words. I remember leading a mission team into New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. We may need to prepare ourselves to do likewise in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. Prayer implies a willingness to roll up our sleeves and do the work God has given us to do. Thus our very selves become a prayer, living sacrifice not just to God, but to each other.

In human history, there are other kinds of disasters. Warfare, violence, racism, injustice and oppression are certainly nothing new to our times.

Slavery has been around for a very long time. Our first lesson reminds us that the new Pharaoh didn't know about Joseph and cared nothing about God. In Egyptian theology, Pharaoh was a god. He was accountable to no one but himself. So when he saw that the Hebrew folks were becoming more numerous than was politically comfortable, he decided that the male children should be killed off. When the midwives thwarted his directive, he required that the little male Hebrew babies be set adrift in the Nile to die.

But God will not be mocked, Pharaoh! That goes for any and all others who like to trust in their own power and who think "more highly of themselves than they ought to think".

Pharaoh's daughter saw the little Hebrew child floating in the bullrushes and she saved the little fella and called him Moses, literally; "Moshe", meaning "I drew him up out of the water". With a clever play on the Hebrew word, and an interesting turn of phrase, the name suggests that he would draw his people up out of the waters of the Red Sea and bring them from slavery in Egypt and into freedom in the Promised land. Then of course, Moses gave the people the Law since freedom requires responsibility.

In today's Gospel, Jesus led his disciples to Caesarea Philippi by the headwaters of the Jordan River. Here we go with the notion of water again. Interestingly, the Temple of Pan is located there. Pan was popular as a Greek god of desolate places. But there in the cave at this Temple there is a spring that provides copious amounts of water. The place is made holy by this water which is after all, the source of life. In due course the Jordan became a popular place for Baptism in the early church.

And so it is that in this sacred place dedicated to Pan, Jesus wanted to know; "Who people say that I am?"

The disciples answered; "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

But Jesus said; "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter recognizes and proclaims Jesus as the Christ of God. It is in this context that Jesus proclaims Peter as the Rock on which he would build his church. Each recognized the other for who they were.

Notice also yet another Biblical triple play on words. The word "Peter" as you know means "Rock". The Rock on which Jesus builds his church is not like a limestone rock the Temple to Pan is built upon. No, the Church will be built in the hearts, the minds, the souls, and bodies of the people of God beginning with Peter and the disciples of Jesus. As the prophet Ezekiel says; "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

That means you are the Rock, the Petra, the Pierre on which God continues to build this church. Your hearts will be filled with love, forgiveness and reconciling power.

As a "simple parish priest" and now your Interim Dean, you and I pick up where others have left off. We enter a new season in the church year.

We have a Nursery, a Sunday School and a Youth Group to build. We are responsible for the lives of our people young and old alike. How shall we faithfully and joyfully share our gifts so that we may bring ourselves and others into that place where we may encounter the Holy, the living God?

We have gifts that God has given us each according to the Grace allotted to us. We can tell God's story and our story. God's life is woven into the very fabric of our lives. For God's sake, tell that story!

How shall we sing the songs of God and make music to the Mighty One in our midst? Only as each of us offers the gifts given to us can we make such music. By the way all God really wants, is for you to sing joyfully. I am so glad you sing as well as you do. It lifts the spirits to sing. It would be nice if we were all able to sing tunefully and in the right meter, but that's not the essential matter. You are indispensable when it comes to music. With good direction you'll pick up the tunes and the meter all in God's good time. In the meantime, sing your hearts out. And make bold to join the heavenly chorus.

How shall we make provision for God's church? Obviously by becoming members of the church, by becoming good stewards of God's grace, and by becoming cheerful and generous disciples of Jesus. By giving in proportion to what God gives you, you will become Peter, the Rock on which God will build the Church! We are not an institution; we are The Body of Christ, we are what our Presiding Bishop calls, "The Jesus Movement".

It really is quite simple isn't it? We are one body in Christ.

Nature and History are a challenge to us. As we make our way through our challenges, we must face the storms that assault us whether Hurricanes, wildfires, or racial discord, and so on. The challenges go on and on and on. We are resolved to face those challenges with the grace God gives. In the midst of all our challenges, there is this essential question; who do you say Jesus is? He is the Christ of God! And who does he say that you are? You friends are Peter, you are the living stones, the very rock on which Jesus builds his church.

In the Name of God, the Most Holy, Undivided, Everlasting Trinity. Amen

Fr Paul.