

Living Stones

Have you ever blurted something out around other people, or done something without really thinking about it, only to regret it almost immediately? Something you said in the heat of the moment, or something that you thought would be funny, but realized instantly that no one else did. Something that made you look really foolish, or worse, so much so that when you thought it about even years later, you still cringed at the memory. I suspect more than a few of us have done something like that at some point in our lives. I certainly have, not many, thank goodness, but a few things that to this day I still can't believe I did. What was I thinking?

Can you imagine, then, how discouraging it would be if having done something like that, it was the one thing that everyone remembered about you? I mean, no matter what else you may have done in life, no matter how much you may have accomplished, no matter how much good you'd done, still, whenever your name was mentioned, the first thing out of everyone's mouth was, "Do you remember what he said? Can you believe he did that?"

Well, if you can imagine what that would be like, if all that anyone ever seemed to remember about you was that one foolish thing you blurted out one day without thinking, then you can probably imagine how the apostle Thomas must have felt. Here you have a man who, at least according to tradition, accomplished an enormous amount of good over the course of his life, a man who was in many ways every bit as significant an early Christian missionary as the apostle Paul, even carrying the gospel as far away as India where Mar Thomas, or St. Thomas, is still revered, and yet for most people, you mention Thomas and the very first thing out of their mouth is "Doubting Thomas." All because of something he blurted out one day without thinking, something no doubt he regretted having said to the day he died, something I'm sure no one ever let the poor guy forget.

Granted it was not entirely out of character for him to do something like that. There are several occasions in the Gospel of John where Thomas blurts out something that if he'd just thought about it he probably wouldn't have said, at least not the way he did. In fact, in John, Thomas is a lot like Peter in the other three gospels, the one that always said out loud what everyone else was probably thinking, but had sense enough to keep quiet. In that respect, he plays the role of the "straight man" in the Gospel of John, in much the same way that Peter does in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

But while they play similar roles, Thomas in John, Peter in the synoptics, there's an important difference in how they're portrayed in those gospels. Often times when Peter blurts something out, he's held up for ridicule or even condemnation—for example, when Jesus says to him, "Get behind me, Satan!" There's very clearly here the sense that he shouldn't have said what he did. But that's not the case in John, where the comments of Thomas come across not so much as a

failing as simply reflective of their humanity, the struggle he's having with what Jesus is asking of them, the struggle frankly that any of us has.

That makes a big difference in how we read the gospels. Whereas the plain spoken and revealing comments among the disciples in the synoptics tend to be held up as a serious flaw sometimes even verging on betrayal, conduct falling far short of the expectation Christ has of his followers, in John, those same failings seem just to be reflective of who we are, flawed behavior to be sure, but then we're flawed individuals. Far less than perfect disciples, granted, but there are no perfect disciples. Just us. This different tone strikes me as something more than just a recognition of our human failings or imperfections, a grudging acknowledgement of an unfortunate reality, the fact that God doesn't have anything better to work with than us. No, I think it's a dawning realization on the part of John—we might even say revelation—that far from being a disquieting weakness of the church, the fact that we are flawed disciples is actually the source of much of its strength. That is to say, in a very real way, the strength of the church lies in our weakness as individuals.

This is the point that Peter is making in our epistle lesson for today, though unfortunately he's using a metaphor that I doubt any of us understands, because he's talking about something with which you and I have little or no experience. As a result, we don't get it; we don't see the point he's making. He's talking about building stone walls. Now when's the last time anyone here ever built a stone wall? Even if you did, or more likely had someone do it for you, you used something that they didn't have in Peter's day, that being mortar. Actually it was about this time that the Romans invented concrete, which was one of the keys to many of their most notable achievements by enabling them to build things, like aqueducts, on a much grander scale than anything anyone had ever built before.

But Peter didn't have concrete, or anything like it, so for him building a stone wall meant simply piling up stones, and that was a real art, because the stones weren't cinder blocks or bricks that you could simply stack on top of each other. No, all they had were the stones lying around out in the fields, or as he says "living stones." Now if you were just building a stone wall out in a pasture, you could get away with just piling the stones up in a heap. But if you were building a house and needed to erect walls more than a few feet high, you had to be a lot more careful. You had to fit the stones together, no two of which were exactly alike, a little like working a jig saw puzzle. In such a wall, it was the interlocking of all those irregular stones that was the key to the wall's strength and stability.

That's Peter's point. That the church is a spiritual house whose walls were built of living stones, each of them carefully chosen to fit in place and so fit together. You—he writes—are those living stones, which God has carefully chosen to build up the church, stones every single one of which is irregular and peculiar and frankly odd. All of which might lead a human builder to reject a stone and look for something better, but is the reason why God has chosen them. Because what individually was their weakness, when put together became their strength. A house anchored by the cornerstone of Jesus Christ himself, the stone which he notes had also been

rejected, and yet which in God's hands had become the very foundation of the spiritual house that is the church, a house which would stand forever.

Of course, that can be very difficult for us to see, and therefore difficult for us to believe. Just as difficult as it was for Philip to look at Jesus, at Jesus the real man and not the idealized portraits we've made of him, and most of all to look at Jesus upon the cross, and see God Almighty. In exactly the same way, when we look at the church and see all the living stones, every single one of which is flawed and imperfect, flaws and imperfections that are painfully obvious, we naturally think that if you build anything out of all these flawed stones, what a mess you're going to end up with. You're going to build the one holy catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ out of this? No way!

Yes, way! For that's exactly what God has done. That is the way, the truth and the life, for all of us are the living stones out of which God has built the church upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*