A Proclaiming People
1 Peter 2:4-12; 3:13-17

Beginning last Sunday, we're spending a few weeks looking at how the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is enduringly relevant for us and those we mix with - whether at home, work, or on campus. And last week we looked at Moses and how the Lord chooses even reluctant people - like Moses or us - to take his message out into the world.

But today, enough of that individualism! Instead, we're going to look at us as a community, and what Peter has to say about: who we are, and what we're to do - about our identity and purpose together.

So we're going to look at four things: A distinct community, a proclaiming community, a spoken-against community and a hopeful community.

A Distinct Community
If you had to describe something as being dead, what would you say? In English you might say, 'dead as a door nail.' Or, 'dead as a dodo'. Or 'stone cold dead.'

And think of that last one. Because if I were to ask you: imagine something pulsating with life, you would not think of a rock, would you? 'Ok, I've got to imagine something overflowing with energy and vitality and life… I know! I'm thinking a great, big, immovable, utterly stationary stone… that just sits there.'

You're not thinking like that, are you: 'stone' and 'life' are like polar opposites. *Except*, Peter says, when it comes to Christ. Look at v4, 'As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.' And v6, 'For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."'

Now, every community is built on something, isn't it? Think of a group like the Americans Women's Club - built on nationality. Or your running or cycling club - built on sport. Or a political party - and people who think alike vote alike.

So the church is not unique because it's built on some foundation - every group is. It's that it's foundation is not the passport you carry, or pastime you practice, or philosophy or politics you hold. It's a man. And the unique claim of Christianity is that he died and rose again. That its cornerstone, that great, hulking, load-bearing stone on which God is building his house, his community, is alive. That he's the *living* stone, *the* cornerstone, and he's Christ.

Which is why Peter says in chapter 3:15, 'In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy.' And you could translate that, 'set apart, or worship, Christ as Lord in your hearts.' But the sense is the same: If God has made Jesus *the* foundation on which he's building his house, and if as Peter says in v6, Jesus is 'a cornerstone *chosen and precious*' to God, then doesn't it make sense that in the deepest part of us, in our hearts, in what we love and cherish most, we're going to set apart Christ as the Lord of our lives?

But Peter's point here is that we don't just do that as individuals. Instead, regardless of all our differences, *like* nationality, politics, or sporting prowess, we're honouring him as holy, and setting him apart as Lord *together*, and like living stones we're being built together on *the* living stone.

Now, if you're not yet a Christian, why should that be of any interest to you? Well, if you look at surveys and statistics on how people feel about modern life, one thing that repeatedly stands out is loneliness, that comes from that deep inner desire for community and friendship. And Peter's saying, there is a community where you'll fit; a community where despite all our differences you're needed and wanted.

And look how he describes that community, the church: v9, 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.'

Now, we can't look at those in detail, but each one takes a title, an honour, or a task of Old Testament Israel an applies it to us. That we're a chosen race, because irrespective of nationality we're one new people in Christ. So what bodies like UN struggle to do - and bring people together across national or ethnic boundaries, Christ does every single day.

And we're a royal priesthood, because Christ is our king, and each one of us is a priest, offering, as we'll see in a moment, spiritual sacrifices of worship to our king.

And we're a holy, set-apart nation, because Christ our king is our first allegiance, above even that which we owe our home nations. So, if you look out at the world, and see what's going on, and despair of our leaders, what you're recognising, however dimly, is your desire for a perfect leader, for onw who always acts with justice and mercy. And in Christ you have that much better king, a leader you never need be ashamed of.

And we're his own possession, Peter says. Now, does God own everything? Absolutely. But if you're a Christian, and part of his people, he owns you in a special way, because he bought us with the life of his Son.

So, we're not distinct just because we're built on a different foundation to every other group - we're distinct because that foundation - Christ himself - deserves our worship and first and ultimate allegiance.

But there's a consequence of having Christ as king, isn't there? Because now we don't quite fit in the world like we used to. Verse 11: 'Beloved, I urge you, as sojourners and exiles…' I mean, you might speak the same, dress the same, eat the same as your friends and colleagues, but in reality, if you're a Christian, you're a foreigner in a strange land, Peter says.

And living in Switzerland, you may know what it's like to feel away from home - to be a foreigner. Exactly, Peter says, and that's what it should feel like to be a Christian in the world. You're different, you're like a square peg in a round hole. You don't quite fit. Because this isn't your home.

And did you notice how that shows itself? Because it's not down to whether you like cheese or speak the language, is it? Verse 11 again, 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which war against your soul.' And he's not just talking about sex. Are we, as Christians, called to a very different sexual ethic to the world? Absolutely. As one second century writer put it - 'we share our bread, not our bed.' We're generous with everything except our bodies. And we don't have sex before marriage, and once married we only have sex with our husband or wife.

And yet, Peter's got more than sex in mind, hasn't he? Because, in the New Testament, 'flesh' means more than just our physical, sexual bodies. It's about life lived apart from God and without reference to God and in resistance or rebellion to God. And so, if Christ is our king then anything other than him that controls us, or dethrones him, anything I must have because if I don't have it I'm not going to be happy, anything I want or love too much, is a desire of the flesh. And that might show itself in anger - because your reputation, or having your own way, matters too much to you. Or greed - because food, or drink, or this physical body matters too much. Or gossip - because looking good and feeling good about yourself, by putting others down, matters too much.

And yet, it's not the desire in and of itself that's wrong. It's not wrong to desire someone beautiful, or be loved by one who is beautiful. It's not wrong to desire to be honoured by one whose opinion matters, or to have a name. It's not wrong to desire to feel full and complete. What's wrong is when we're seek those things first and foremost somewhere other than in the one who is supremely beautify and ultimately fulfilling. When we seek them, in the flesh and not in God. And when we do, they become like enemies warring against our souls, Peter says.

So our foundation makes us distinct. But so too should the way we live, Peter says. Because God has taken us who were once perfectly at home in the world, and made us his own.

And as he does, one thing in particular will make us stand out.

A Proclaiming Community

Now, I have 3 sons-in-law, and talk to them and it really doesn't take long to get them on to their favourite subject. And I now know more about water turbines, obscure German theologians, and cooking salmon on juniper branches than a man should ever know.

But that's always the way isn't it? You can't help but talk about the things that excite you.

Verse 9, 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvellous light*.' So it's not just God - it's that his excellencies - his greatness and glory - that have taken hold of us and captured our hearts, and as a result we talk about it. As a community, we proclaim it.

And Peter's not fluffy about what we proclaim, is he? 'The excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvellous light.' And v10, '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.'

So other groups, maybe even some churches, get caught up by other things, so they talk about politics, or sport, or their grievances. But God's people, Peter says, are going to proclaim the gospel. The goodness and greatness and grace of God in Christ. That we were once stumbling around in the dark, blind to his beauty and lost to what life was really about - mistaking good things for god-things and reaping the consequences. But out of his sheer grace he brought us out of the dark and into the light of his love.

And before, we were weighed down with the weight of all those things we shouldn't do but do anyway, and those things that we should do but don't, and all those right things we do but for wrong motives. And we carried the guilt of all of that. In Peter's words, we'd not yet received mercy. But

then God took hold of us, and showed us how Christ lived the life we fail to live, and died the death we deserve to die - and took all the guilt that was ours to bear and, in its place, gave us all his righteousness. So now, we've received mercy.

Talk about that, Peter says. You're God's people, so proclaim his glory and grace.

But did you notice how we're to do it? Because it's not flat and one-dimensional. It's by word *and* works; verbally *and* visually, by conversation and conduct, by lip and by life.

Firstly, through our words, in two ways. Verse 5: 'You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, *to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*' So a church doesn't have just one priest, standing up front, doing stuff for everyone else. Christ is our high priest, who has made the one, perfect, never-to-be-repeated sacrifice for us all. And in him, Peter says, we're all made priests - not to offer physical but spiritual sacrifices.

And you can take the wide-angle view of that, and see that those spiritual sacrifices encompass the whole of life - like Paul in Romans 12: 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Rom 12:1). Or, like the writer to the Hebrews, focus in on one part: 'Through him [Christ] let us continually offer *a sacrifice of praise* to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.' (Heb 13:15).

So, how do we proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvellous light? We sing about it. We sing songs that proclaim the gospel and sing them with all our hearts. As AW Tozer said, 'The church will be known by our singing.' Or to misquote Les Miserables, 'Do you hear the people sing?'

But then, Peter says, we're to proclaim it by being ready to talk about it: chapter 3:15: 'Always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.' So, you and I are *not* called to be some kind of professional Christian apologist. But all of us *are* called to be day-in, day-out ready to talk about it kind of people. That as a church community we're in the business of making Christianity credible, and explain the hope the gospel gives us, and why Christ is precious to us, together.

But as Peter says, that might require some preparation. Which is why next month we're going to be doing our module on Sunday evenings to help equip us to do just that.

So, we sing the gospel and we speak the gospel. But we also live it. Verse 12: 'Keep your conduct among the gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.' So, whether it's in the way you go about your work, or use your resources of time and money, or treat those around you, Peter says we can be a living advert for the gospel. That we proclaim him with our words, *and* with our works. Because if Christ laid down his life in service for us, we want to lay our lives down in service of others. And in a world that's increasingly focused on self, that gets noticed.

So, while we may be distinct from the world, we don't withdraw or isolate ourselves from the world. Instead, when we get the excellencies of Christ our king we proclaim him - in song, and speaking, and serving.

But not everyone's going to appreciate that.

A Spoken-Against Community
You see, Peter's a realist, isn't he. Because if we used to be in the dark, then others still are, and that will make some hostile to the message that things could be different. Verse 12, some may 'speak against you as evildoers.' Verse 14, you might 'suffer for righteousness' sake.' And verse 16, 'when you are slandered' and people 'revile your good behaviour'.

Now, you and I can be spoken against because we're obnoxious or proud or self-righteous. But that's not what Peter's talking about. He's saying that you can be doing everything right; you can be full of good works, and serving your neighbours and colleagues; you can be investing your time in learning how to explain the gospel to others, and take the opportunities when they come, and do it with grace and tact. And still your colleague won't like it.

But Peter's not naive to that, is he? You see, the Roman empire was surprisingly religiously tolerant - all the time you were willing to honour everyone else's gods, and express your allegiance to the emperor, you were left alone. What they could *not* tolerate was the exclusivity of Christianity, and the Christians' claim that there was only one God, and that Jesus was Lord not Caesar.

Things haven't changed much, have they? All the time you keep your faith as *your* faith and let everyone else have theirs; all the time you restrict your proclaiming to your good works, and not your words; all the time you keep your faith private and out of the public square, things will be fine. But suggest that there might be something like spiritual darkness, or that we might be in need of mercy, and that Christ is the only way, then things begin to get uncomfortable.

Don't be surprised by that, Peter says. Verses 7-8: 'For those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence."' In other words, all the time Jesus is just another stone someone can build their life on if they want, it's fine, but the moment he is *the* cornerstone, the one stone on which God is and we all must build, then he becomes offensive and a stone people stumble over. And if they rejected him, Peter says, they will reject us.

Is that a reason to stay quiet, or be pessimistic? Absolutely not Peter says.

A Hopeful Community
Firstly, hopeful for ourselves. Verse 6, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him *will not be put to shame*." So Jesus was rejected by men, but to God he was chosen and precious. And the same is true for those who trust him. We may slandered, or even shamed, but at the final reckoning of our lives, Peter says, those who believe in him won't be ashamed that they did.

Verse 7: 'The honour is for you who believe.' So just as Christ was insulted and shamed and spat upon at the cross, so we too may face criticism or mocking. But just as he was raised to life, and exalted to glory, and given the name above every name, so we too are chosen and given new life in him, and lifted up and seated with him in heavenly places, and honoured by God in ways we do not deserve.

And if that's how God treats us, we can be full of hope for ourselves. Verse 15 again, 'Always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason *for the hope that is in you*.'

Like, 'Hey, why don't you complain at work like the rest of us? Why are you still happy and seem to be at peace when we know life is hard for you right now? Or, you always seem to be singing or humming something - why is that? Or, why when we're criticising the bosses, or our spouses, do you never join in?'

Why? Because you know that once you were in darkness but now you've been brought into his glorious light. Once you were weighed down by sin but now you've been forgiven. And life might not be going the way you want right now, but you know that God has chosen you, and because of Christ he loves you, and honours you, and is working all things for your good.

So we're ever hopeful, as individuals, and as a community.

But we're also hopeful for those who don't yet believe. You see, Peter says we should live such distinct lives, v12, 'So that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds *and glorify God on the day of visitation*.'

Isn't it a bit scary to think that people, from your kids to your colleagues, are watching your life? And yet, whether it's the first thing that gets them thinking, or the last link in the chain that persuades them of the gospel, on the last day, when Christ returns and wraps everything up, there will be some standing beside you, maybe your neighbour, maybe your friend, maybe a colleague, and they'll be glorifying God for his grace that they saw in your life.

And it's because we have that hope for them, Peter says, that when it comes to making a defence for the gospel, v15, we can 'Do it with gentleness and respect.' You don't need to *own* or *crush* or *destroy* people who see things differently. To proclaim the good news of Jesus is not like being a heavy weight boxer in a slug-fest. Christ has already triumphed. He's already chosen and precious, and you are already honoured. So your worth and the outcome do not depend on you winning this argument. It depends on him. And he might just be drawing this person to himself. So we don't need to be prideful or arrogant. We can be gentle and respectful, Peter says. Because we're full of hope.

So, we're called and chosen to take the gospel to our friends and neighbours, and do it together, as a distinct and proclaiming community. And even if we face criticism… we are hopeful. Because as Paul said, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe' (Rom 1:16).