Beautiful Stones

November 17th, 2019

One evening, I was walking along a lonely highway in western Japan. The only sounds were the light summer breeze, the crickets in the high grass, and the water running in a narrow river that wound its way through open fields. In the indigo twilight, I walked along the road, lost in thought. A road sign proclaimed that I had reached the palace of the Toba Emperor. There was nothing in sight besides a hill with some pine trees, the open fields, the quiet river. Only a name remained from an ancient time. Our lives pass in such a way, and many of the monumental things that we undertake vanish with little or no trace. Jesus spoke of this to his disciples when they visited the temple in Jerusalem, as we read today in our lectionary: “When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’” (Luke 21:5-6). The disciples were eager to know when this would take place, and Jesus prophesied and described the events that would close the 1st Century: the great famine of 44 AD, the great earthquake of Colossae that left the city in ruins, another great earthquake in Pompeii in 62, the outbreak of war between Judea and Rome in 66, and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD (American Bible Society, *Lectio Divina*, November 15th, 2019). There was also a great comet in 87 (John T. Ramsey, “Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets from 500 B.C. to A.D. 400”, *Journal for the History of Astronomy,* Vol 38, No, 2, 175-197. May 2007). As Jesus says, “‘When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.’ Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven’” (Luke 21:9-11).

Jesus was scandalous for many reasons—for proclaiming himself the Son of God, for dying like a criminal, for preaching to the miserable and unlettered and the enlightened and powerful as equals, for declaring himself to be the only way, truth, and life, for preaching an otherworldly kingdom, for offering divine beatitude to those who would be meek, poor in spirit, pure in heart, and peaceful, and for rising from the dead. One could dedicate seasons of sermons to studying the scandalous nature of his teaching and his actions, and one such scandal is his proclamation of the impermanence of human effort against the eternity of the Word, the impermanence of the earthly Jerusalem against the eternity of the New Jerusalem. Not coincidentally, our word scandal comes from the Greek word *skandalon*—a cause for offense, or in Peter’s words, a Λίθος προσκόμματος (a stone of stumbling) and a πέτρα σκανδάλου (a rock of offense). As he says in 1 Peter 2:4-9: “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The temple made with physical stones is to be replaced by the temple made of living stones. These living stones are you and I, and you and I live because we have hopefully not rejected the cornerstone, which is Christ.

The poets Yves Bonnefoy and Ryszard Kapuściński have both linked words, language and memory to the image of stones (Ryszard Kapuściński, *I Wrote Stone*. Biblioasis, 2007; Yves Bonnefoy, *The Curved Planks,* 2007). And in Scripture, we have numerous references to the same. In the Book of Revelation, our identity in God’s divine life is thus described: “To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it” (Revelation 2:17). In the Book of Nehemiah, the enemies of God taunt the returned exiles who want to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem: “Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burnt ones at that?’” (Nehemiah 4:2). Nevertheless, the returned exiles build. The book does not end with just the physical rebuilding of the walls, however. The climax comes when the word of God is proclaimed in this midst of the people: “And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’, lifting up their hands” (Nehemiah 8:5-6). Our building stones of the new temple are our own lives, our identities in Christ, the testimony of the Good News that we bear inside and share with the world, the Holy Spirit at work within us—this, this is what builds the new temple of the Holy Spirit. This is what the apostle Paul proclaims: “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you” (1 Corinthians 6:19); “For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:9-17). Salisbury Cathedral in England was built without about 70 thousand tons of stone ((“The Cathedrals of Britain”, BBC History, 2014). That may seem like a great quantity of stone for one building, but there are currently some two billion living stones on this earth who bear the name of Christ and pray in His name. That is a much greater temple or cathedral, the ones who bear the testimony of Christ and endure the impermanence of the world by living in the permanence of the truth. Every great movement in the history of the church began with a radical encounter with the word of God—whether we speak of the first Christians, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the Waldensians, the Franciscans, the Lollards and Anabaptists, the Reformers, and even the Baptists. I believe that the best part of their movements came from the fact that they encountered the stone that the builders rejected and became living stones, beautiful stones. And indeed, when Jesus speaks in apocalyptic terms of the end of the age, he emphasizes the role of his witnesses, his apostles, in bearing the testimony that he has entrusted to them: “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict” (Luke 21:12-15). The new temple will be built in the transmission of this testimony, in living the words that the Lord has entrusted to his children. These are the words of life (John 6:68). In what way will Jesus’ words be true? For many of the apostles were crucified, stoned, beheaded or driven into exile by those authorities before whom they stood. What is this wisdom that none can withstand or contradict? It is the eternal wisdom that outlives all things; it is the Holy Spirit that nothing can withstand because he is eternal and reclaims his own for resurrection and salvation.

Lastly, Jesus says, “By your endurance you will gain your souls” (Luke 21:19). God calls us to be steadfast: “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58); “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved” (Philippians 4:1); “…stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:15-17). Some of the earliest prayers of the church reflect the eternity to which we are called, the endurance of goodness and truth in the Gospel, and the endurance given to us through faith and the Holy Spirit. In Revelation, the creatures proclaim: ““Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8). And the ancient church has for centuries prayed: “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, as it is now, and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.” Radiant and pure, these prayers remind us that the eternity into which we are called is a divine communion of love. God does not merely dwell in the past. God is with us in our present, and God awaits us in the future: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8), the Son of the “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). There is nowhere in time where we will be left alone as orphans. Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).