

We who listen to today's second reading live in a variety of dwellings. Maybe a neat brick or timber frame bungalow on a suburban section, maybe in an apartment, some stories up in a high-rise block. Maybe even, if we have decided to spend our youth exploring the world, or our years of retirement visiting the remote corners of our country, a campervan.

When Peter's epistle was written back in the first century life was simpler. Sure, even then there was more than one way your home could be built. But if you wanted something durable, practical and virtually burglar-proof, and not too expensive, you could not do better than build your house of blocks of stone. Stacked one on top of another, fitting snugly into place, such blocks made up buildings with which every one of the epistle's readers was familiar.

So when Peter wanted to remind his readers of what the church community really is, what better image to use than that of a building and of the stones that make it up.

The spiritual lesson starts by talking of one stone that is of fundamental importance, the cornerstone. This is seen to be indispensable. Unless Christ was there as a fundamental part of the structure, unless he was at the core of the community of believers, there simply could not be the kind of building of which the writer of the epistle was talking.

The great point about this cornerstone was that it would not be like an ordinary stone, inert and impersonal. This cornerstone would be a living stone. It would glow with life in an exceptional fashion. It would in fact be pulsing with the life of the Holy Spirit, which had led the Lord to give his life for the salvation of humankind.

Normally when we think of what makes up the Church we think of it as a coming together of human beings, a kind of super club. Perfectly true. But it adds a further dimension to our understanding of the Church if we see it as made up of living stones. These stones are of different shapes and have diverse positions in the building. But stones that have life and without which the Church would lack its completed shape and its full beauty.

The sacred writer could not contain himself at the end of his brief reflection on what the church community is like. He broke into the rhapsody of words with which today's second reading ends. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light". You who hear these words this Sunday are indeed the living stones through which the Church has come into being.

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