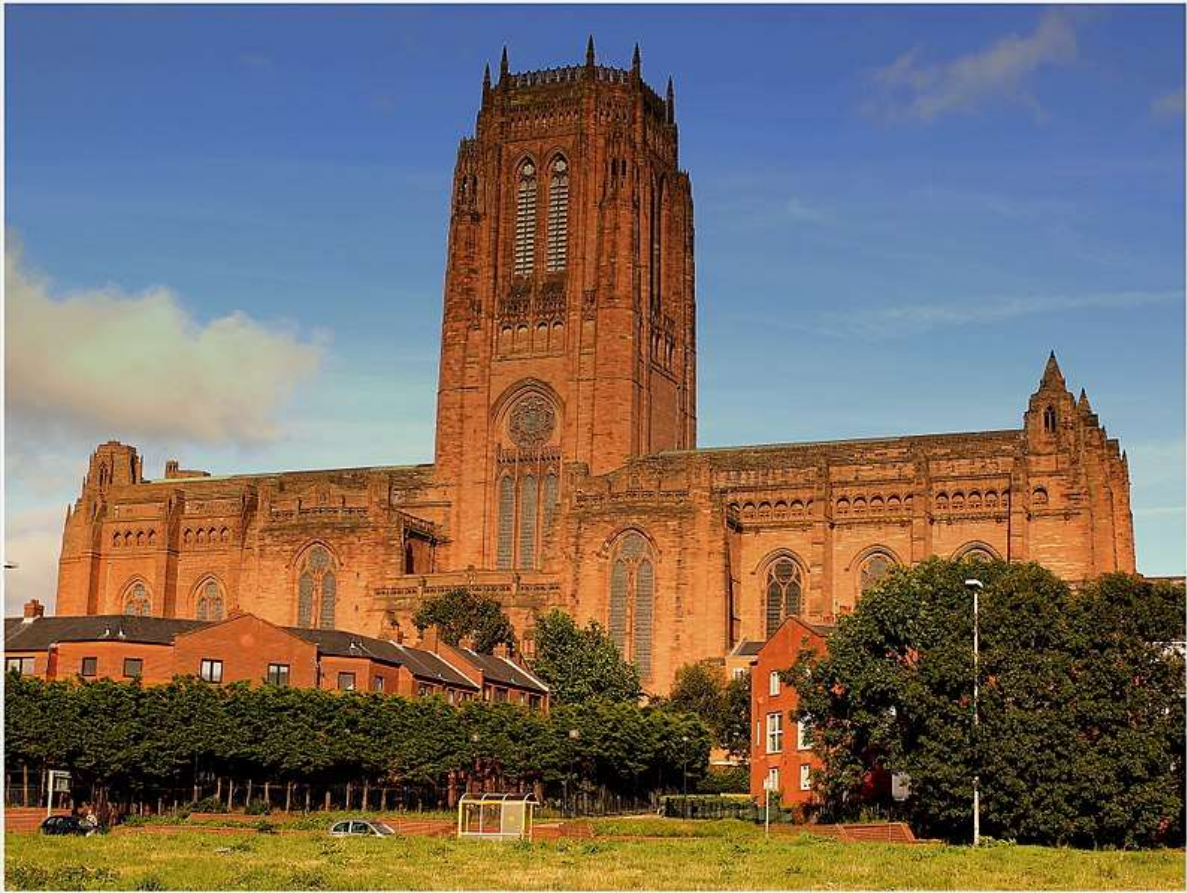


A living temple - 1 Peter 2.5



Come, and let yourselves be built as living stones, into a spiritual Temple (NEB) is a plea we heard in our reading: 1 Peter is a letter written to a congregation whose faith was being tested by various trials, and very likely persecution (2.12 and 2.19), and Peter provides them with these words of challenge and encouragement.

I am proud to be a Liverpudlian. I love the city's architecture, its museums and art galleries, its theatres and access to many different types of music; its people with their unique sense of humour. I have always been proud of being a non-conformist but have always loved Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, its beautiful red sandstone and magnificent stained glass built, in the words of Bishop Chavasse, 'To speak for God in the middle of the city.' (Kennerley p.67)

I grew up being told that the building of the cathedral continued during the war, in part as a sign of defiance but also as a sign of hope for the city. To keep building during the blitz demonstrated real determination as the workforce reduced from 220, to just 35 who were all past the age they could serve in the armed forces. To keep building was also a real

statement of optimism for the future: many people showed huge commitment to the building: the Dean and some other members of staff took up residence there, whilst some the builders worked there during the day and camped there overnight so they could do fire-watching duties. In 1940, following consecutive nights of bombing, 12 of the windows in the Lady Chapel were destroyed beyond repair. In the November King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited to see how the work was progressing, see the damage that had been done and to show solidarity with the city. The King encouraged them saying, 'Keep going whatever you do, even if you can only go on in a small way'.

Keeping going in such dreadful times was important. Those solid pieces of red sandstone were, and still are, more than just building materials or chunks of stone. In those times of real suffering and fear, the continuation of the building, and this new cathedral's very existence, was a declaration that the city would not give into the suffering and pain and loss that was being inflicted. It stood there as a sign of hope.

The disturbing, destructive crisis we are living through is made even more difficult by the fact we can't meet together and support each other in the way we would like to. Part of the Cathedral, during the war, was used as a public air raid shelter, but we can't seek sanctuary within our own church buildings. Yet, whilst we have been Zooming worship we have kept on affirming that we remain the church. 1Peter says: Come, and let yourselves be built as living stones – he was saying to people who, despite the suffering and persecution they faced, you are called to be living stones and witnesses to the love of God.

Peter takes this idea of being living stones even further: as individuals we make up the church but being the church is not just for our own benefit. The verses we read, and which were quoted in our opening prayer, contain the words, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people called by God, that **you may declare the praises of Him** who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light (2.9). We are called to share with others what we know of God.

Walter Brueggemann, who has written many books on the Old Testament, says:

The wonder of the people of God in the OT is the marvel of transformation whereby Israel, who were 'not a people,' became God's people. (Sabbath as Resistance 47-48)

That OT verse about 'not being a people' is quoted in our reading from 1 Peter and Brueggemann is saying that, when at its best, Israel trusted in God's grace to transform them and make them into something new, and this trust was demonstrated over and over again. So, the story of the Exodus describes how they were transformed from being slaves into a nation. Then many years later they adapt to life in Exile in Babylon, but were then able to readjust to the challenges of the return and the rebuilding of the Temple. They

learned how to live under the Romans, but were then able to find a new vision after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. They were open to repeated transformations which enabled them to hold onto God and worship in new ways.

We are in an unprecedented situation. Never before have churches agreed with a government that for everyone's safety they have needed to close. We miss our church: its beauty helps us to recognise and experience the presence of God. We don't know what the new normal might be. But this crisis has also reminded us that it's each of us who make up the church: we are living stones being built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood as Peter describes it. Because we are living stones we are not building something that is static, but something that is able to readjust to new circumstances and situations, one that is open to God's grace to transform us and make us into something new. That means that, with God's grace, we will be able to adapt to the new normal; we will find the strength to hold on, and prayerfully discover ways to engage with those who look for the transformation of our communities, our society and ourselves.

- Rev. Dr. Christine Jones