

So here we are at the start of a new year and we have probably already made and broken resolutions. As we start a new year the danger for us is that we see this year in our lives as more of the same. However, for us as a church I want us to try and avoid that feeling. I want us to see this year and every year as a year of opportunity but also to help us have a clear aim through the year. Last year we had a focus upon growing up into God and we had as a Bible verse, "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ", Eph 4:15.

So what lies ahead this year? What is our goal and aim?

Well our aim is our Church strap line "to follow Jesus in every way" but this year we continue to seek to grow as a church and especially to build our membership to 250 by the end of 2018.

To help define our church life this year I have selected another verse and this is from 1 Peter 2:4-5, "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

So what has God got to say to us as a church through this?

The verses tell us quite a lot about the community of faith, the church.

Peter was written to Christians in Asia, in what we might call modern day Turkey. In the early verses of the letter Peter has spoken about their new birth to a living hope. Recognising the persecution they were going through he encourages them to persevere and to live holy lives, getting rid of things that create disunity in the church and to grow up in their faith.

So having written about the behaviour of the community he now writes about the nature of the community.

### **1. the church is defined by Jesus Christ**

"as you come to him....you are"

The community of faith, the church is defined by Jesus. Our character as people and as a church, our nature and our purpose are all defined by Jesus.

As you come to Jesus...what?

The old adage is that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a car. But the point Peter is making here is that coming to Jesus changes us. Coming to Jesus and allowing him to be Lord in our lives then shapes our nature and character. As we come to him we become like him. He defines us as his Spirit at work in us changes us. We re as Paul put it "being changed into his likeness with ever increasing glory" (2 Cor 3:18)

Let me encourage us all no matter what has gone on in our lives in 2015 to look ahead and to say to ourselves this year more than ever I am going to come to Jesus. This year I am going to have those

regular times of quiet when I read God's word and pray. This year when things crop up I am going to pray about them. This year in difficult situations I am going to ask God for help to live as Jesus would. This year I am going to take more seriously the opportunity I have to grow in Jesus and become more like him so that he defines my life.

But then let me also encourage us as a church to do that as well. To show in our relationships with each other the grace and mercy of Jesus. We will not always get on with each other but as we come to Jesus we learn to bear with each other, to forgive each other, to carry each other's burdens, to pray for each other. Why do we do this? We do it because this is how Jesus lived and as we come to him we are defined by him and we live his way. Our strap line is "to follow Jesus in every way" and that should be our goal and I want to set it before us this year again both as individual Christians who will live out our faith in the world around us and for us as a church as we seek to lift the banner of Christ here in Chineham and beyond.

"as you come to him....you are" being defined by Jesus.

The church is defined by Jesus

## **2. The church is under construction**

many of you know the reality of that having seen this building being put up. You know some of the problems that caused and how while it was happening allowances had to be made because of the building work and people had to rub along together. As Christians and as a church we are under construction, "As you come to him, the living Stone...you also like living stones are being built into spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

As you come you are being built. It is the image of a church growing, a church growing together but also of an ongoing process. This physical building may have been finished for some time but this spiritual building, the church of Jesus Christ here at Christ Church continues to be built. New stones continue to be added and the existing stones continue to be shaped. This means that the church is meant to be growing, dynamic in terms of moving forward and changing. But living and worshipping on a construction site is not always easy or comfortable.

This is part of our challenge for this new year.

The image is of the church **growing**. Now I know stones don't grow but here these Christians and we as we follow them are described as living stones. We as Christians are living stones. What does that mean?

It means we have life in us not just human life but the very Spirit of God. We are alive to God and that is why we have come to Jesus and continue to come. But as we come God takes us and builds us into a spiritual house, a temple, a place where God dwells. God lives in his people individually and

corporately. God is at work amongst us making us his people but more bringing us together as his house, his church. The picture is of a church under construction and growing together to God. It is also a **dynamic** picture of the church evolving and moving forward and God grows us together. God's Spirit is at work amongst us and he draws us to Jesus and he draws us together and builds us as one people to the glory of God. The words "you are being built" are about progress about things happening and things moving ahead. As a church we must by our nature be dynamic and moving forward so again let me encourage us to put aside 2015 and any things that may be regrets and instead look ahead and say as a follower of Jesus and as a church we need to be looking ahead and embracing what God will do amongst us this year.

In this the church will be constantly **changing**.

Now I realise that word is not a comfortable word but if we are under construction it will mean that things will continually be changing. How do you feel about that? The church in general has not always been a place of change and innovation.

Before I came here I was the leader of a couple of churches in Oxfordshire. There were both 12<sup>th</sup> Century churches and inevitably with such places the easy option was to do things in the way they had always been done. Fortunately in both churches we had sufficient people who were willing to accept change. The words "we always do it this way" are not great for churches because if we are under construction then it involves change and it involves new people new ways new things and especially as new stones are added to the growing spiritual house of God.

I have often said to people as we have been preparing for a service and there are lots of different things going on and we are not sure if it will all hang together that it was much easier to lead a service in the days when I first started when you turned up opened up the service book and followed what was there and all that was different from the previous week was the hymns!

Now I don't want to knock that but the picture I get here is of a progressive people where things are changing as the church grows.

However if we are under construction then that means more than ever we need to be defined by Jesus if we are to flourish because new things and new people are a challenge to us, the mess of the building site can cause friction and difficulties and we need the character of Jesus to deal gently when things and people go wrong.

I say this especially to myself because sometimes when I arrive on a Sunday morning the building can resemble a building site. Chairs may have been moved, the musical equipment may have been moved, the sound system may have been changed, there may be bags of bottle tops left outside in the rain and so on. My heart sinks and yes I moan – Gordon will tell you.

I like things in order and I think I have to learn that even with the building because it is being used it is not always going to be perfectly in order. So I need to recognise that we are under construction and learn to rest easy with things not being perfect or in order.

But then how much more does this apply to the spiritual house which is being built with us who are fallible and imperfect human beings. We are under construction and we need grace and love as we are part of a growing, dynamic and changing church.

### **3. the church has a purpose.**

If we follow the verse on, ,“As you come to him, the living Stone...you also like living stones are being built into spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5). Why are we being built into a spiritual house? So that we can become a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices. This is our purpose as Christians and as a church to be holy priests and to offer spiritual sacrifices.

Peter says the same thing in a different way in v9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”.

Individually and together we are not only the stones that form the house but also the priesthood that serves in it. We are to be people who offer spiritual sacrifices. What does it mean to be a priest? Well in v9 Peter speaks of offering praise and thanksgiving but as well as that a priest intercedes on behalf of people and so prayer is part of the sacrifices we can offer. But then also in other ways of service. As we come to Jesus we are being built together so that we can serve God and each other. The start of the year is a good time to reflect on our spiritual lives and to ask what is God wanting of me and here we see we are called to “offer spiritual sacrifices” to be involved in service. This is how we show not just our commitment to God and his word but also to his house his people. So what might God be asking of you in this area this year? There are so many areas in the life of our church where we could do with more people being willing to serve. If we have come to Jesus and are being built into his house then this is part of that building and part of our purpose as we serve as that holy priesthood.

“As you come to him, the living Stone...you also like living stones are being built into spiritual house to be a holy priesthood”. Over the coming year we will use part of these verses to help shape what we do as a church. We will take the three parts as you come, you are being built and to be a holy priesthood and through sermons and activities work out what it means for us and we will put them into practice.

So as we think about “As you come to him” we will especially think about how we help others to come to Jesus, that is come to faith. We have the Alpha course coming up to help us with that so do

think who you can bring along to that. Also as you can see from the sermon cards we will be looking at John's gospel and thinking about how people came to Jesus.

Then later with "you are being built" we will think about discipleship, about being built up and being built together and we will look at Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Finally "to be a holy priesthood" we will think about what it means to be a priest, those who intercede for others so something on prayer but also those who serve so something on service, those who offer worship and so on.

"As you come to him, the living Stone...you also like living stones are being built into spiritual house to be a holy priesthood".

We are being encouraged to come to Jesus and as we do so to recognise we are being built together as his people with all the messiness of that and the need for grace as we deal with each other. We are being built together so that we can praise and serve God and each other.