**1 Peter 2:1-10**

What is the church? What is St. Andrew’s? Why do we come to church each week? What is this thing that we are constantly called to be a part of and to find our place within?

 It might seem like a really obvious question to ask - but I am sure that each one of us has different reasons for being here, different reasons for staying here through thick and thin, good times and bad.

 What is the church? What is St. Andrew’s?

 Is it just an old building, a beautiful heritage site? Is it a family of people? Is it a community network for friendship and relationships?

 What is the church? What is St. Andrew’s?

 We are continuing our series on Peter’s first letter and so far, he has talked about our need to be holy, to be set apart for God and to be purified by him and that our spiritual obedience is to accept the Gospel message. And now he moves on to develop the implications of this for us as individuals, but more importantly for Peter right now, for us as a community of faith, the church. This morning’s passage is primarily about our corporate identity as Christians in relationship and fellowship together. This morning’s passage is about our identity as a church; who we are as church, who we are in our identity together as St. Andrew’s.

 If you want to follow the passage with me, you’ll find it on page 250 in the second half, the New Testament, of the pew Bibles.

 But whilst this passage is primarily about the nature of the church, in the first three verses, Peter begins with some comments to us as individuals.

 Peter begins in verse 1 by saying, “Rid yourself, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander”. So what do these words, ‘malice’ and ‘insincerity’ refer to? And this idea of malice is a very interesting one, particularly in the light of what Peter said before in this letter about us being holy and set apart. Because the idea of malice that he draws on here is one of nursing grudges against a particular person or against society as a whole.

 Peter, in Chapter One, urged Christians to separate themselves from the world but it seems to me that Christians can live out that separateness in one of two ways. Some Christians live out their separateness by becoming harsh and judgemental about people who are not Christians or people who live a radically different lifestyle. We probably all know some Christians who are judgemental about people of different religions or who have a different sexual orientation, for example, and use theology to condemn these people as misguided at best, or evil at worst. This, I think, is the type of thing that is indicated by Peter’s word ‘malice’: a condemnatory grudge-holding against others.

 But the other way of living out the life of separation is to do so without judging and without condemning and to be always motivated towards those who are different from us with unremitting love, compassion and understanding.

 “Rid yourselves of all malice…”, says Peter. As Christians, we are to have an alternative response to people. And that alternative response is a hallmark of our spiritual growth, as Peter says in verse 2: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk.” But what is the spiritual milk we are to long for?

 There is a collection of hymns from the period known as the ‘Odes of Solomon’ and the idea of milk flowing from the breasts of Christ is a common metaphor in these early hymns. And the idea in these early hymns is that spiritual milk is actually grace and mercy that flows from Christ to us and sustains us in our daily living. And so Peter completes this sentence by saying, “Long for the pure, spiritual milk so that by it you may grow into salvation”. We are born anew and so long for and seek after divine grace and mercy, which will bring us to vindication on the last day. And Peter completes his idea in verse 3 when he says, “you have tasted that the Lord is good”. You have tasted that the Lord is good, so now pursue his grace and mercy until you come to salvation.

 And so we come to the next section of his argument - and what Peter does here is to move from the idea of talking to us as individual Christians and now begins to talk to us in the plural; as a community of believers, the Church.

 Verse 4: “Come to him, a living stone…”

 You remember from previous weeks that Peter is writing to Gentile converts, so he calls Christ a ‘living stone’ - which is drawing a contrast to the pagan idols that they would have previously worshiped; idols that were dead and lifeless, made of wood or stone.

 And he goes on to make this extraordinary comparison in verse 5: “You yourselves are like living stones…” There is a sense in which, if we belong to Jesus, we become like him and that is reflected in our corporate life together as the church, verse 5: “Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood”.

 Some people have interpreted this verse to mean that we are all priests and so there is no need for churches to have a priest with a dog collar: we are all equal, so we can all fulfil the priestly functions. Well, yes we are all equal – I am not more worthy in God’s eyes just because I have a dog collar than any of you. But that is not what Peter means here. By saying we are a holy priesthood, he is not saying that all of us are priests but that corporately, as the church called St. Andrew’s, together we have a priestly role.

 But what does that mean in practice?

 The word ‘priest’ comes from a Latin word that means ‘bridge-builder’. The priest is a bridge: priests form a bridge for God to come to the people and for the people to come to God. And in that sense, St. Andrew’s has a priestly role - because we, as a body of Christians, as a church, must be a bridge between God and the community of Enfield. Through the priestly ministry of St. Andrew’s, God will come to the community of Enfield and through the priestly ministry of St. Andrew’s, the community of Enfield can have access to God.

 As a church here at St. Andrew’s, we are a holy priesthood because we form the bridge between the community and God. It is a wonderful calling to have – but it is an awesome responsibility and we must take our role as a bridge-builder very seriously indeed.

 So how do we go about fulfilling our role as a bridge for God and the community? Peter gives us a clue in verse 5, where he says that our purpose is “to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”. But what does this mean?

 Presumably, Peter is not suggesting that we are to engage in the sort of sacrifices that had been common throughout the Old Testament. Instead, the only other two parallels in the New Testament are in Romans 12:1 and Hebrews 13:15-16. In these passages, ‘spiritual sacrifices’ refer to offering ourselves to God in worship but specifically in Hebrews by doing good deeds to those in need.

 So our ‘spiritual worship’ as Christians has a definite social justice agenda: we don’t just come to church on a Sunday or Tuesday or whenever and sing hymns and pray prayers and believe that this is the sum total of our worship. Instead, we offer ourselves, our whole lives, our life as church, as an act of spiritual worship as we engage with social justice agendas and work to alleviate poverty and improve the lot of the marginalised and vulnerable. That is our spiritual worship. That is the way in which we act as a bridge, a holy priesthood at St. Andrew’s: through our worship activities in this building and through our participation in social justice agendas and good deeds through the rest of our week.

 As we work for the transformation of society, so we are a bridge, bringing the Kingdom of God into the community life of Enfield. As we put on acts of worship in church, so we are a bridge, over which the community of Enfield can walk into the very throne room of God.

 “You are a holy priesthood”.

 And then Peter goes on to cite Isaiah 28:16 to make clear that the church will be build on the stone that is Jesus Christ. So what is the identity of this church – our church here at St. Andrew’s - that is built on the stone that is Jesus Christ?

 In verse 9, Peter uses a number of images that were once titles ascribed to the people of Israel that Peter now transfers to the church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”. These titles all come from Isaiah 43 and Exodus 19 and they are a beautiful description of just how special the church is in the eyes of God: just how precious the church is to our heavenly Father.

 And what is our response to God’s love shown towards us as a church? Verse 9: “we proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”. As a community, we must proclaim the love of God who is calling us out of darkness towards the marvellous light that will be finally revealed when Christ returns on the last day. At St Andrew’s, we are constantly moving into being a mission-shaped church and as we embrace more fully the 5 Marks of Mission, we will grow into a deeper understanding that proclaiming the love of God is partly through evangelism and worship but also through how we nurture one another in the faith, how we show pastoral care and love towards those how hurt, how we battle against social injustice, and how we treasure God’s good creation. All these activities that we will increasingly undertake as part of our developing mission are proclamations of the mighty acts of God who loves us and calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

 And so finally in verse 10, Peter uses Hosea 1:9 to make a new point specifically for his Gentile audience. In Hosea 1:9, God says, “You are not my people” but here, Peter says, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people”. His point is simply this: as pagan Gentiles, not only were they not God’s people, but they weren’t even a people at all in the sense that they had no corporate or community identity. That identity only happened when they believed in Jesus and found their sense of identity in God.

 Perhaps we might want to say the same thing in our present context; that the idea of community formation as a church at St. Andrew’s can only truly come about when we submit ourselves to the Lordship of Christ and come under the rule of God.

 And that, of course, is exactly what our mission-activity is ultimately all about - a defining feature of the church.

 We want to submit ourselves. We want to see our local communities come under the Lordship of Christ. That is our ultimate prayer and what we are working towards and we pray for God’s guidance as we seek to make that a reality.

 What is church? What is St. Andrew’s? St. Andrew’s is a holy priesthood set apart by God. St. Andrew’s is a bridge between the community and God, and God and the community. St. Andrew’s is a holy priesthood called to proclaim the glorious love of God both in word and deed. It is an incredible calling to have.

 And within this holy priesthood that is St. Andrew’s, God has called you each by name to play your part in that. Each one of you has been destined by God, chosen by God to carry out the priestly ministry here in Enfield. As Peter says in verse 10, “Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Each one of us has received mercy from God and he wants us to find our place within St. Andrew’s as a priestly ministry so that we can proclaim God in word and deed.

 Every single one of has a place and a role in that priestly ministry. I wonder if you know what your role and place is yet?