

**Sunday 10 May, 10.30 Morning Worship**  
**Parish of All Souls North Warwickshire**  
**1 Peter 2:4-10**

Apparently league tables are important. At least so I am told. And those who follow football, who are already upset at the preacher. 'League tables are everything', you cry! Clearly the controversy about what should happen when teams can't play is raging. Stop now and finish as it was when the pandemic hit? Try to finish the season? Make some calculation based on past performance?

Who knows! I'm sure, as people say, it's very important.

Competitiveness is present everywhere. Families in lockdown, like ours, are doing mini-Olympics and online gaming has exploded as people complete locally and globally. Families, sports and nations love to be no.1, best in show, top of the league. Just ask Mr Trump, he'll tell you!

But this week we topped a darker, more tragic league. Passing 30,000 COVID-19 deaths we look on course to have the worst outcome in Europe. Not a league we hoped to win back in March. Not something to celebrate, no trophy to hold aloft.

How do we make sense of such a number? Certainly there will be post-match analysis of the most painful kind, accusations and blame will be made, and no doubt careers ruined. But that does not change the tragedy or comprehend the loss.

Perhaps we start by remembering each is an individual, a neighbour or friend, a mother, or son. Statistics are always personal. Just as in a building each brick and block and stone is important, the one builds on the other. The overall effect loses the individual, but the building is utterly reliant on each one. Every person lost is precious.

It is a construction image that Peter uses in our reading, the cornerstone on which the building stands. A badly placed stone causes disaster. But the well-placed cornerstone is secure. Of course, this image is not about buildings or league tables, but God's kingdom. The cornerstone is Jesus. Built on him, we like living stones, will be a spiritual house.

It is a timely reminder as we think about how we might re-enter our church buildings after lockdown. In the end it's not about the stones and stained glass, but our people, our living building. What has God said to us in this crisis? How can we share God's love for the world? Have we noticed new better things? Perhaps part of the new normal, whatever it is, will be to put our people before our buildings whatever the cost. Let's not assume we carry on with business as usual, rather rebuild with a new plan, better connected to the true cornerstone, Jesus.

In verse 9 Peter appears to offer us a league table we would love to be in, one of life not death: '*A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession*'. I guess it's more list than a league, but run with it!

Down the years many people and nations have claimed that list. In this week of the VE Day anniversary we are rightly thankful as we remember sacrifice and cost, to welcome peace and joy. But it's a salutary reminder that in every war nations claim divine blessing for their cause: holy and righteous in delivering death and destruction.

These very verses have been used to give the impression that God favours certain politics, that some armies are chosen to be victorious.

But to assume God's special blessing for our nation alone is always a profound and grave mistake. Even in this pandemic, I've heard some childish comments about Italy and elsewhere sound like we think we would beat it alone, the plucky Brits with their Blitz spirit. But just as VE day was an international triumph, so today we must resist myths of our own exceptional power and work internationally to find healing. That is mature, grown up salvation.

Because this is not about our strength or resolve, but God's. That's why we must read the next verse 10, *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* It is God's mercy that makes us his people, his spiritual house. That is why we must be built on the cornerstone of divine love, the crucified and resurrected Jesus who gives that love by his Holy Spirit.

1 Peter was written to Christians coming to terms with their place in a dangerous and confused world. They needed to hear that God loved them, that they were not isolated individuals, but part of a bigger family; they were not weak and helpless, but empowered by the love and mercy of God; they were not reliant on what little strength they had, but built on the most powerful force of love creation has ever seen, Jesus Christ.

Even in isolation we can be a strong spiritual house if we remain founded on Jesus. In Jesus we are chosen by God's love not our power or ability. In Jesus we are a king's priesthood to share love, not keep it selfishly to ourselves. In Jesus we are a holy nation to bring redemption to all creation, not to dominate & destroy. In Jesus we are God's special possession because we are his children called, not to be overcome by a pandemic, but *to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

Such prizes are often seen in small acts of kindness, in neighbours bothering to phone, in lockdown time given to prayer and reflection, in taking collecting food for distribution, in cultivating Jesus presence in our lives, in contributing to Captain Tom, and countless other acts of praise.

It was deeply moving on Friday morning to see who would bring food for our Feed Birmingham initiative organised by Thrive. Across the city there is a lack of food for those in need. We waited on the street wondering who would turn up. Then out of the quiet one car turned in full to the boot with food. Then another, and another they kept coming from all over the city till we had more than we ever imagined. Every Friday people will come offering prize in supermarket bags.

So even as we top the league table of death, there is mercy, compassion and hope for us and our neighbours. This crisis is far from over, but as we emerge, what will it look like to show we are built on Jesus our cornerstone of love? What will our communities remember of the church in this time? How will we share God's love and holiness as his priestly people?

Friends, I do not know how they will, sort the football league. But I do Jesus has already risen, the cornerstone is firmly laid, and the house is being built from mercy, love and strength.

You too are a precious stone. We need you. So join in. Let's be part of it, wherever we are. Amen.

**Ven. Simon Heathfield**

Archdeacon of Aston