

Do you collect stones? I do - I collect stones; all kinds of stones, all shapes and sizes. Stones shaped by water are the best and I have gathered them for years from beaches, rivers and streams. Stones shaped by water are smooth and comfortable worn down to amazing shapes by the force of the water. But crystals and other mountain stones are equally fascinating. These stones are hard and angular but there is real beauty in the shapes and colours forged in the heat and depth of the earth. You might wonder what I am doing talking about stones when today is Palm Sunday, surely I should be talking about palms? Yet, here I am talking about stones.

On our journey through Lent this year we have been looking at joy, the real deep joy that comes from our faith, our trust in God's love for us whatever happens in our lives. We have walked with Pope Francis in his book *Joy of the Gospel* to see how having rediscovered this joy we can come active, joy-filled disciples exercising pastoral mission as an essential part of our Christian faith. Along the way we discovered a way of reading the Bible and other spiritual writings, call *lectio divina*, or *divine reading*. Letting a particular word or phrase speak to our hearts. And this brings us to stones because the phrase from this morning's very familiar gospel which settled in my heart this week was *the stones would shout out!* Jesus says this when the powers that be suggest that his disciples and the crowds accompanying his procession into Jerusalem should *tone it down a bit, quiet down, stop making such a full or in other words shut up about Jesus being King!* To this bit of unwarranted interference Jesus responds that even if every person with him were to fall silent *the stones themselves would shout out the good news of Jesus as saviour and king.*

So today is a day to listen to the stones, so to speak, to rediscover where and how we find God in our modern world. There is a story told in Italy about Michelangelo and stones which I hope may help us here. And since Michelangelo worked in Rome for Popes I think it goes well with our Lenten journey with Pope Francis.

Everyday God would look down from heaven to the earth to watch over his people and to see what they were up to. And every once in a while he would go to visit his people and dwell with them, though usually no one recognised him. Sooner or later, however, someone would come along and find him and then he would disappear from their sight and return to the heavens.

And it seemed that some of his best hiding and watching places were in rocks, stones, canyons, caves, wells and mountains.

Soon there were stories told about these stones, many of these stories are recorded in our own scriptures. Stories about a stone that Jacob used for a pillow and dreamed of angels ascending and descending to earth. And the ones about Jacob's well, Elijah's cleft in the rock or Sinai's mountain and many about the great stone Temple in Jerusalem. Then Isaiah the prophet promised the presence of a cornerstone [but was it a rock or a person?] Then, not so long ago, Jesus came and told his people that it wasn't necessary to worship in certain places anymore; not in temples or on mountains. But then Jesus died on the place of the skull and was buried in a rock-hewn tomb and he became the place to worship in or at. It wasn't long, though, before people began building high places and piling up stones and going to worship there. Some who knew Jesus, like Peter, warned that God required living stones but people were already having trouble recognising God. They seemed to be looking only in these places that they had built for his honour and glory for his presence and God wondered what he should do about it.

One day God's attention was drawn to a commotion that was going on around a man in Italy. This man loved stones. All day he would chisel away at the barren slabs and after time, energy, and painstaking effort, the stone would live. It was almost as if he discovered something alive inside the stone and went about freeing it with a passion. He had set many people free already and this time he was attempting to set God himself free! For years he had been working on one huge piece of marble, and slowly over the years the figure of a woman holding the body of her dead son was emerging from the rock. And this time even God was surprised at what was being born out of stone. He went to Michelangelo and spoke to him.

*What are you doing?* God asked Michelangelo. *Lord*, he answered, *I am setting you free, so that everyone will recognise you - not only in stone, but in everything, everyone who dwells on earth, but especially in all those who suffer needlessly. I don't want people to forget you.* And the Lord spoke to Michelangelo, *Do I really dwell in that stone? I know in the past I have often gone to rocks and mountains, wells and tombs, but I don't remember going to dwell in that stone you are working on.*

And Michelangelo answered God: *But my Lord, since your Son came to us, you don't have to pick and choose your places of rest; he left your Spirit everywhere. We just have to search it out, discover it, touch it and reveal it to others. That is what it means to live now.*

And more that satisfied with Michelangelo's answers, God left him to set God free from the stones.

We are people of stones - Peter tells us that clearly in his Epistle. More importantly we, as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ are living stones. With all these stones in our background we face the same temptation as those early Christians to whom Peter addressed his letter. Our history as a church has been a constant struggle between building up temples to God and of calling forth life from the stones around us. We are faced today, just as the church in the past was faced, with deciding whether our priority lies in finding God only in our places of worship or in encouraging one another to see God's presence hidden in every rock and leaf, man and woman, community and household. The choice, as Pope Francis, would say between guarding our private faith or risking reaching out in pastoral mission.

We are people of stones - living stones but by and large we have got our priorities wrong. So much of our time, energy and talents is often put into the stones which surround us in our churches. The stones in this morning's gospel give us another path to follow. The very stones themselves which lined that path which Jesus traveled call us to be living witnesses to the Good News of the Gospel for everyone, to shout against the world's desire to silence us, to relegate us to being safe relics of the past. The very stones themselves call us to shout the joy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.