

## Sunday 28 June 2020: Dedication of the Jerusalem Stone

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Feast of St Peter and St Paul.*

**Readings:** [Acts 12.1-11](#); [2 Timothy 4.6-8, 17-18](#); [John 21.15-22](#)

'The Lord stood by me and gave me strength', our patron Saint encourages his disciple Timothy in today's epistle reading (2 Timothy 4.17). Our ministry of making known the good news that God seeks for all people to come to know and love him, regardless of their race, language, cultural background or gender, is a privilege, Paul knows. But it can also be wearing and costly: 'I am being poured out like a libation', he writes to Timothy (2 Timothy 4.6). 'I am being poured out like the water that is offered to God at the temple altar'. Drawn from the spring of Siloah and poured down the golden limestone steps in front of the Jerusalem altar. The libation of water that was poured out symbolically each year at the harvest festival was a reminder that God is the giver of all life. That his mercy and lovingkindness overflows like a mighty river. 'I am being poured out', Paul tells his friend and fellow worker in proclaiming the good news, 'but the Lord stands by my side'. And he encourages Timothy that God will similarly sustain and strengthen us in our costly ministry of sharing the gospel.

Later in this service, just before we celebrate Communion, I will be dedicating a new stone plaque that has been embedded in the middle of the nave altar platform as a tangible reminder how God seeks to strengthen and sustain all those who labour for the sake of the good news. The limestone, from which this new plaque has been carved, comes all the way from Jerusalem. It was given to me in 2004 when I was still working in the Church of England, by the then Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem. The round stone weighs about five kilos, is about the size of a cheesecake, and was personally handed over to me by the then director of communications of the Anglican Communion, Canon James Rosenthal. (Thank you, Canon Jim, for carrying it in your cabin luggage so many years ago!)

The stone is said to have formed a historic pillar base; possibly even one of the stones replaced during the restoration of the dome of the Holy Sepulchre in the 1990s. It was intended to be embedded in the sanctuary of a new church or chapel. When we moved to Australia eleven years ago, the stone travelled with us. For about a decade, I nearly forgot about it altogether. When we were setting up the Deanery Coach House as a studio in January for our Cathedral artist-in-residence Annique Goldenberg, I literally stumbled across it again. 'What will we do with the large round limestone from Jerusalem?', my partner Katherine and I discussed in January. And we felt that, in the absence of an opportunity to place it in a new church, the stone should become a permanent part of St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne.

And so we took the stone to the Cathedral, showed it to Archbishop Philip, to my colleagues and the members of the Cathedral's Culture and Heritage Committee. Together, we decided that the stone should be embedded at the heart of our Cathedral. As a reminder of our

connectedness to the place of the resurrection. And as encouragement that in the work of the gospel God sustains and protects his servants; that he stands by them and gives them strength, as Paul puts it in today's epistle.

In late February, the stone was prepared by Cathedral artists Janusz and Magda Kuzbicki. [[It's a joy that the two are with us this morning for this special moment.]] The round limestone was cut in half, into two 6cm thick disks. One of the disks will be kept for its original purpose, and will at a future date be used in a newly-founded parish church or chapel. The other disk has been inscribed with the Jerusalem cross. Four crosses nestling around a large central cross. The reminder of the cost of our salvation, which was wrought for us on that bare outcrop of limestone on the outskirts of Jerusalem on which the church of the Holy Sepulchre was built in the third century.

We chose an inscription for the stone, which connects us to an even earlier Jerusalem, to the city of the psalmist. 'Zion, city of God, of whom glorious things shall be spoken' (Psalm 87.2). God's sanctuary that was 'founded upon a holy hill', as today's psalm recalls (Psalm 87.1). The inscription that surrounds our stone is also taken from the psalms. A song written by King David. Psalm 103 speaks of God's lasting faithfulness, and his strengthening of his servants. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name', David sings (Psalm 103.1). 'God forgives all your iniquities, heals all your diseases. He redeems your life from destruction', the poet king prays, 'and crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies ... so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's' (Psalm 103.3-5).

It was this central part of King David's extended prayer—'he crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies' (Psalm 103.4)—that we chose for an inscription. And because all liturgical inscriptions in this Cathedral are in Latin, we used a translation of the Psalter composed by the theologian St Jerome at about the time when the Holy Sepulchre (and the Church of the Nativity near Jerome's own home were constructed in nearby Bethlehem). 'Coronat te misericordia et miserationibus', Jerome's translation of the psalter reads.

Most projects at St Paul's on average take eighteen months from conception to completion. That is because we have to seek the relevant permissions, secure funding and, with artistic projects, agree on concept, scope and merit. This project was completed in a mere four months: testament to the unanimous agreement of Chapter and its subcommittees of the uniqueness of this gift from Jerusalem and its significance for our worship space. During the Covid-19 lockdown period, the stone was carved, and in the days before Trinity Sunday was installed at the centre of the nave altar platform.

It has not escaped me that the stone's inscription begins with the word 'coronat'—the Latin word means 'he crowns'. We are unable to meet in person today because of the threat of a crown-shaped virus, the coronavirus. The inscription on our altar-stone is of course first of all

meant as a reminder of God's graciousness to his people throughout the generations. From the days of King David to the days of 'great David's greater Son', Jesus. From the days of Jesus to this day. From today to a future of generations yet unborn. But in some ways, it will also serve as a memorial to a time when we relied more profoundly on that trust in God's protection during this coronavirus pandemic. And so, the stone will serve to remind us that God does seek to crown us with lovingkindness and mercy, both in times of joyful celebration, as in times of profound crisis, such as the pandemic we currently face.

'Coronat te misericordia et miserationibus' — 'God crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness' (Psalm 103.4). God's mercy was most profoundly shown on Calvary, when he gave his own Son Jesus on the cross, so that all nations may receive healing, wholeness and peace. And that all people might receive life forever in God's presence. In today's epistle reading, Paul shares with his disciple Timothy his own expectation that, when this life is ended, he would fully enter into the loving mercy and compassion of God. In the place where God dwells, Paul knows, 'there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness' (2 Timothy 4.8).

In this life God crowns us with compassion, and in the life to come he crowns us with a crown of righteousness. That crown is not reserved for the heroes of faith alone, Paul tells. God will crown all people 'who have longed for his appearing' with righteousness (2 Timothy 4.8). For Paul, the knowledge of the heavenly crown that awaits those who long for the second coming of Christ, gives confidence for living, and particularly for living in times of difficulty and danger.

In the winter of his life, writing to Timothy from prison in Rome, the apostle Paul feels as if he has been poured out as a sacrifice. He has given his all to show forth the generous compassion and loving-kindness of God. He has 'preached his message in season and out of season' (2 Timothy 4.2). He has ceaselessly told his fellow-believers that God accepts sinners, and struggled to convince them that God even accepts people who do not keep all the commandments of the Law. 'No one came to my support. All deserted me' (2 Timothy 4.16). In spite of all rejection and hardship, however, Paul has maintained the faith that God knows no chosen few. And not only kept that faith himself, but commissioned others, like Timothy, to share that good news: 'Crescens has gone to Gaul, Titus to Dalmatia, Tychicus to Ephesus' — old and new communities of faith founded by Paul and his disciples, all nations beyond the Jewish heartlands brought together under the tender mercy of the God of forgiveness and love (2 Timothy 4.10-12).

Paul's commission to the church builders Timothy, Crescens, Titus and Tychicus is at once is simple and arduous: 'Pass on the news that God's love knows no bounds to a new generation; hand on the faith in the God who, in Jesus Christ, calls all nations to his friendship, fully among those who have yet to hear it, or who have drifted away from it'. That God longs to crown his people with loving-kindness and mercy in this life; and with the crown of righteousness in the life to come.

This commission is not only for Timothy and his companions. The story of the God who loves to hear us on call on his name and ask that he would restore us, and forgive us those things that might have separated us from his love; the story of the God who knows no favourites, has no special people, but longs for people from all nations and languages to know him, is addressed as much to the first Christians as it is to us.

And today, as we bless a historic stone from Jerusalem, the city where the redemption of all nations was wrought by Christ on the cross, and that good news was first proclaimed, we place into the heart of our Cathedral a tangible reminder of that charge. That ours is the task of passing on this good news to our own generation: in this city and Cathedral that we call home; in the places where we live and work; and in the places that speak of God's love in our communities.

'The Lord crowns us with mercy and compassion' are words of encouragement placed at the heart of our Cathedral, 'coronat te misericordia et miserationibus'. Especially at this time when we remain separated from one another because of the current pandemic, I take great comfort from the knowledge that God walks closely with us and blesses us. That God seeks our wellbeing and welfare even (and especially) in times of challenge and tribulation. And that God commissions us to make known that good news – that his loving-kindness and mercy is for all people, and all generations – and for us, in our own time.

This Patronal Festival it is my prayer for me and you, that God will strengthen us to continue to 'fight the good fight, finish the race and keep this faith' (2 Timothy 4.6). With our patron, St Paul, I pray that God would continue to 'rescue us from every evil ... and save us for his heavenly kingdom' (4.18). I pray that, in our separation, God would keep us united, would 'stand by each one of us and give us strength'. I pray that he would enable us to speak words of loving-kindness, show forth deeds of mercy, and signs of his compassion 'so that through us his message might be fully proclaimed' in our own generation (4.17).

Now to him, who crowned his Son with thorns to heal the nations, yet crowns us with mercy and compassion, to him be glory and praise, thanksgiving and power, now and forever. Amen.