

## SPG#168, EASTER 5A

April 20, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 7:55-60

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Even in these days of economic downturn there are many construction projects going on in downtown Des Moines. Most of these projects are businesses such as Allied Insurance, apartment buildings, and some retail space.

These construction sites indicate what is to come. Businesses, offices, and people will occupy the buildings that had been construction sites. People by the thousands will move in and out of those buildings. All of these construction sites are not just about concrete and steel but about the coming communities of people who will occupy these buildings. Furthermore, each new building was only an idea at one point, perhaps in the mind of an architect. Then the idea was put on paper and perfected. Plans were drawn up to show the exact dimensions of each part of the building. The same is true for our building modifications here. For a long time these hoped for modifications have been a dream. Now with architects and plans the hoped for is about to become a reality.

In a similar way the writer of 1 Peter gives us a look at the plans and ideas of a spiritual edifice that is under construction. This structure is not specifically made of concrete and steel. It is made up of people. The writer of First Peter calls it a spiritual house. He calls the people who make up the house a holy priesthood, a royal priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people. The purpose of this spiritual house of people is to proclaim the mighty acts of God who has called these people out of darkness into his marvelous light.

This spiritual house has a cornerstone who is Jesus Christ himself. For those who do not believe, Jesus is an unlikely candidate to be the cornerstone of a spiritual house.

Or as it says in 1 Peter, “the stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.”

For that matter all of this chosen people in this spiritual house are unlikely members of this spiritual house.

This is one of those huge sweeping metaphors in the New Testament that has implications for each of us as members of the spiritual house and for all of us as members of the Church. It is such a big picture that understanding and appreciation of the meaning of it may come slowly or not at all. It is, I think, a good approach in this case to make some observations on one piece of the picture at a time so as to accomplish an understanding of the whole.

First observation: As members of this chosen people, this holy priesthood, we are called into a special kind of relationship. Eleven years ago I was involved in an interim ministry here at St. Paul's. Prior to my arrival the church had located this Chester Church and had purchased it, towed it into Grinnell, and attached it to the old church. This story, as you recall, was picked up by the national Episcopal media. The picture of the church being towed into town that hangs near the kitchen was circulated in Episcopal circles around the country. Once the church was in place the job was before the people to repair, remodel, and get it ready for use as an Episcopal Church.

One of the most formidable tasks we had was to convert Congregational Church worship space into Episcopal Church worship space. We wrestled with the issue of standing or kneeling for communion. We wrestled with the placement of the pulpit and the size of the raised area for the altar. The Bishop was due to come and consecrate the building on the fifth Sunday of Easter. So the people had about two months to complete the job. The people worked day and night on it. Families with small children were involved.

Hammers were still pounding, and paint was still being brushed on the day before the Bishop came. But the job was completed. As I look back I think that the people were building something that had to do with the worship of God. But I think at the same time God was working in their hearts to change them, to build them into more of a chosen people, a holy priesthood. They were called into a work. They were called into a oneness, a special kind of relationship. And that experience is kind of a commentary on today's First Peter reading.

Second observation: From 1 Peter today, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." Within these lines of the reading from 1 Peter today is an assumption that has to do with the building and development of any faith community. The assumption is that community within a church is built in the people by God as they work together.

In the Old Testament we find in Nehemiah the people of Israel coming out of exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, which had been destroyed. In that rebuilding some of the people held spears and kept a lookout for enemies. Others worked on the task of physically rebuilding structures, including the city wall.

As they rebuilt Jerusalem God built them into a community, God's own people. I do not think that the people of St. Paul's Grinnell made the conscious decision to let God build them into more of a community. But that is what happened.

Third Observation: In these communities referred to as a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a chosen race, God's own people there is a place for every person in a community. For new people there is potentially a place for them. God's own people has an open door policy. And so the hum and buzz of the people of God is people who have a place and people who are finding a place. Hospitality is a given.

Fourth observation: It seems that the magic of God's own people has to do with two things. First, the people are working together. Second, God blesses the people as they work, making them more into the people of God. As the people serve, God blesses the good deeds of individuals and changes them into a marvelous work of the church.

And somehow the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts.

To sum up then, the spiritual house that I mentioned earlier is a composite of the people of God working and serving together.

But it is not just people. For God is in the midst of them blessing them and their work, changing them into a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, and transforming their deeds into a marvelous work of the church.

We may stumble over that word "priesthood." And I do not think that church members usually consider themselves as priests.

And yet ordained clergy are drawn from the people. And there is an implicit assumption that ordained priesthood is understood because it is drawn from the priesthood of all the people, the royal priesthood.

Some people have asked me, "Charles, what is the future of your priesthood at St. Paul's?" And I have answered, "You tell me." And in that answer I am appealing to your wisdom as a church member and also to your wisdom as one who is part of the royal priesthood here.

And so the questions before us today would include: Where are we with the chosen people of God? Do we include ourselves as part of this royal priesthood that is based on Jesus Christ? Do we see the relationship between being active in the church and being blessed in the church?

Do we see the relationship between the deeds of an individual and the blessed work of a church? For all of us there will be different answers to those questions.

But for all of us, God desires that we be more of a holy nation, more of a royal priesthood, more of his chosen people. So we will not go wrong if we work in the church as appropriate. We will not go wrong if we expect that God will bless the deed and the doer as all our deeds are transformed into the work of the church. It has to do with building and being built. It has to do with the whole being more than the sum of the parts. It has to do with being deliberate about working in the church. It has to do with everyone having a place. It has to do with hospitality and love.

Regardless of where we are on the spectrum of service and blessing, we are ever called into his holy nation, into this royal priesthood, into this chosen race, into God's own people. We are called into a oneness and a companionship with each other and with God. Called into constructing as we are under construction. This holy nation, this royal priesthood is an unlikely thing. It is not predictable. But it is the truth.

Who are these priests, these people? In answer I would simply say that we have seen the priesthood, and she or he is us.

It is we who are called into this royal priesthood, this chosen race, God's own people. It is we who are called to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into marvelous light. Amen.