

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday May 3rd 2026 – (Year A. Easter 5)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church

Bible passages: Acts 7:55-60 and 1 Peter 2:2-10 (NRSVUE)

“Trash or Treasure?”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

The title I'm giving to our theme today is "Trash or Treasure". We are familiar with the saying, "One person's trash is another person's treasure". What is rejected turns out to be of immense value. This has a direct biblical connection. In our two readings today, we see examples of a person being rejected. Stephen is rejected to the point where he is brutally put to death for his faith. This of course was Jesus' own experience. He personally knew the most extreme rejection. This is where Jesus connects with us, since we all know rejection in some form and at some stage in our lives. And when it happens, we can know for sure that our Lord has been through the same kind of pain – being 'trashed' by the world yet precious beyond worth to God. Just as Jesus is like the rejected stone who becomes the precious cornerstone, we too are precious, and each of us are like the valuable and essential building blocks being used by God to create his Kingdom on earth.

MESSAGE

Last week I was walking past my neighbour's house and saw about dozen pieces of nice timber on his nature strip – exactly the kind of timber I need for a small project at home. I thought I should check with my neighbour if he was throwing them out and if he would mind me taking them, but he wasn't home to ask. When I went back an hour later the timber was gone! You have to be quick with these things!

Someone else, like me, obviously saw the value in this rejected pile of timber and took all of it, except for one piece which was badly warped, and no good for anything, which got left on the nature strip. So that one warped piece was rejected *twice* – once by my neighbour and again by the scavenger. That one, sad piece sat there all week, until I decided to take it home on Friday. [show photo]

It's perfectly understandable to reject a warped piece of timber if you are building something. What use could it possibly be? What value could it possibly have?

In our reading today from 1 Peter, it's not a piece of wood that's rejected, but a stone block needed to build a house, as we read: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner" (v7), or the "cornerstone" as it says in some translations – or sometimes "capstone". Cornerstone, capstone or headstone - it's a *vital* stone that holds many other stones solidly in place. But this is a stone that was maybe chipped, cracked, or out of shape- quite useless really. So, it is at first rejected by the builders, yet somehow is later used as the most important stone in the whole building.

It's a metaphor for the life of Jesus of course. He is rejected, despised, humiliated, trashed in every way in the world's 'house', yet he is the One who is exalted and glorified in God's House – the most valuable treasure in God's Kingdom.

What is this saying to us? One thing it clearly says is that Jesus, who knows rejection firsthand, knows what we go through when we are rejected - and we are all rejected in some ways, and at some times in our lives.

Sometimes we are rejected because of our background, or what we look like, or how we dress, or how we behave, or what we believe in. Sometimes our ideas, opinions or suggestions are rejected. Sometimes when we make a mistake and do the wrong thing, people hold it against us for the rest of our lives. Sometimes we don't even know why we are rejected, it just happens. Sometimes we can't even blame anyone else for rejecting us, because we reject ourselves. This last one is far more common than we might think. Whatever the nature or cause of rejection we often end up feeling more like trash than treasure.

Whenever we feel like that, Christ, who has been through it stands with us in love, and with complete understanding. Rejection is never pleasant, but we can be assured that we walk in the very footsteps of Jesus when we go through it.

Stephen, in our Acts reading, was a man who walked in the footsteps of Jesus, in so many ways. There are so many parallels between his experience of rejection, and that of Jesus.

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to help distribute food to the needy, particularly the widows. (Acts 6:1-6). We are told he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit (6:5) and also full of God's grace and power (6:8). Although not an apostle, he certainly acted like one and indeed preached the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts, and that, to a hostile audience of Jewish leaders. The basic theme of that sermon was the way people over the years had rejected God's messengers from the very beginning, culminating in the rejection of Jesus.

The result of that sermon is that his listeners were furious and utterly rejected his words – so much so that he was stoned to death – and we see a number of parallels in his death to that of Jesus, especially his prayer, uttered right at the moment of death, asking God to forgive those who were killing him (v59-60).

How do we feel when we again read this well-known story of Stephen's horrific death? Repulsed? Shocked? Angry? Sad? No doubt some or all of those reactions. But this story evokes yet another kind reaction in us as well, I imagine, and that's *inspiration!* For in the worst moments of rejection, he remains full of the Holy Spirit (v55), eyes focused on God (v55) and constantly praying (v59-60). There was an amazing peace and confidence in this man in the face of death.

How then do we relate to Stephen? We are very unlikely to ever be martyred, and if you are like me, you may wonder how you could ever be calm and peaceful in that kind of situation. But we will experience rejection, and so our question is how to discover, or re-discover our worth, when so many voices in this world want to take that worth away.

The challenge, I believe is to see ourselves as God sees us. To use Peter's words, to see ourselves as "Living stones" (v5), "chosen by God and precious to him" (v4), being "built into a spiritual house" (v5) – that is, the Kingdom of God. According to Peter this is the very essence of what it means to be Christian. We are a "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people... called out of darkness into his marvellous light" (v9). That's how God sees us.

We are still in the Easter Season and therefore we are still exploring what it means to believe in a resurrected, living Christ, and what it means to live as a 'people of the resurrection'. Resurrection means something or someone has been revived and restored to new life. In overcoming death, Jesus became new life for us. We are restored and renewed in him. He builds and rebuilds us into his Kingdom-life.

In the Old Testament, when Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem with the Jews after exile, to rebuild the shattered walls of the city, his opponent (Sanballat) said, “Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble?” (Neh 4:2). That, of course was a physical wall being restored, but it relates to today’s theme. God does that rebuilding in our lives too. He brings discarded stones back to life. Rejected stones in the rubble become living stones in his Kingdom.

In our 1 Peter reading it quotes Isaiah 28:16 saying, “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Then Peter adds, “This honour, then, is for you who believe” (v6-7). These words carry the idea of restoring honour out of shame. Jesus was shamed but ultimately honoured. Stephen was shamed but ultimately honoured in God’s Kingdom. We are shamed but in God we are honoured. We can’t ever fully avoid shame in this human journey. But we can certainly know what it means to find honour in God’s family.

And with that honour comes a responsibility to be part of rebuilding the worth and value of others who have known shame and rejection in any way. Many people around us feel like discarded stones, needing to know how precious they are. As resurrection people it’s our task to offer them worth as we ourselves discover that worth. We must help them know they are treasure, and never trash.

When I took that old, discarded piece of timber I brought home, I wondered how it could be useful for anything, and it occurred to me I could simply make a cross out of it. [show pic or display the actual cross made]. The cross – our main symbol of Christian life and the church – is it trash or treasure? Well, it’s a symbol of trash from one perspective, but it’s a symbol of ‘treasure’ from God’s perspective. It always invites us to live as people of the resurrection, never rejected in God’s eyes, always of immense value, whatever people may say.