

A living hope

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 19th April 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **1 Peter 1:1-12**, Psalm 16, John 20:19-31 (2nd Sunday of Easter, Year A)

(First of a series of 7 sermons on the First Letter of Peter)

Text¹

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, ¹¹ inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

A question of perspective

One of my favourite cartoons is by Larson. It's called The Four Personality Types. In the first of four pictures we see a woman looking at a glass on a table. She says, "The glass is half full". In the second picture we see a man standing at the same table, and he says (you've guessed it), "The glass is half empty". The third picture shows another man looking at the glass, holding his chin and saying "Half full...

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No! Wait! Half empty!... No half... What was the question?" In the fourth picture a rather large man stands before the table with his hands on his hips, angrily shouting, "Hey, I ordered a cheeseburger!"

Contrary to some modern thinking, there is only one reality. But there are many different ways of interpreting it and responding to it. What each of us makes of a situation depends on our personality, our experiences of life, our expectations and what we think was the original question.

In the current lock-down situation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, there are many different responses. For some of us, it's an inconvenience more than anything else. For others, it's a time of feeling alone and vulnerable. For yet others, it represents a loss of income, or even the devastating loss of someone we love. Some people have been shamed in the press or social media for ignoring restrictions on social gatherings, while others have selflessly checked on neighbours, given to foodbanks or spent long hours working beyond the usual call of duty to tend the sick, manufacture ventilators or do other vital tasks for the good of others.

There's nothing like a crisis to show what people are made of. So what difference should being a Christian make to how we respond under pressure?

Why 1 Peter was written

This is exactly the question which is addressed in the First Letter of Peter, which we shall be studying over the next 6 weeks. Right near the beginning of the letter, the author writes of the "various trials" which his readers may have to suffer², and the theme of how we respond to suffering runs throughout the letter. In chapter 4 there is even talk of a "fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you"³.

For Peter's readers there is certainly the lurking threat of persecution. But there is also the more general challenge of living as Christians in the midst of a non-Christian society, where they are likely to be misunderstood or maligned for their faith. Some are at risk of being denounced to the authorities by neighbours. Some are working as slaves within a non-Christian household, and some are Christian women with non-believing husbands. For all of them there are many temptations to conform to the free-and-easy morals of the society around them, where the pursuit of pleasure, sexual immorality, drunkenness and gluttony are considered normal behaviour.

Apart from slavery, which was common throughout the Roman Empire and was a major part of its economy, there are not a few parallels with our present-day world. In our country Christians are much less vulnerable to persecution than in countries like India, Pakistan, China, and Iran (to name just a handful), but nonetheless there is a fear of being criticised for being different: for example,

² 1 Peter 1:6

³ 1Peter 4:12

many are afraid to publicly disagree with “politically correct” ideologies regarding gender, marriage and abortion, to call out 3 current contentious issues.

Peter writes to give his readers encouragement to face these challenges with integrity, courage and hope. I believe that we have much to learn from this letter!

A new identity

When we are in a situation where things are unstable and the future uncertain, there are two factors in particular that help us to cope with the pressures that we face. One is a clear sense of our identity, which is reinforced by a sense of belonging to a group – our family, friends or work colleagues. A sense of solidarity and recognising that “we’re all in this together” grounds us and gives us security. The other is a sense of hope for the future, that we will get through this crisis and there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Peter’s letter opens with both of these things. The theme of Christian identity is the thread that runs through the letter and determines everything that he writes. Let’s start with this.

Peter addresses the letter to “the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”. He is referring to several Roman provinces in the landmass that we now call Turkey. It is very unlikely that Peter himself has visited any of these churches, which were dispersed over quite a large area. But he takes the trouble to write this letter and send it by a messenger who must have taken months to complete the round trip.

The phrase “exiles of the Dispersion” was usually used to refer to Jews living around the world and not in Israel. But, as we shall see in chapter 2, Peter’s readers are Gentiles who have become Christians. They may feel like exiles in a foreign land, as if they don’t fully belong to the world around them, but they are important to God. Peter reminds them in verse 2 that they have been “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood”. When we face the challenges of life, when we are surrounded by uncertainty, it’s helpful to take a moment to reflect on who we are. We are God’s beloved children. He took the trouble to send Jesus to die on the Cross for us so that we could be cleansed from our sins by his blood. Our lives are part of his eternal purposes – we are “chosen and destined”. We have been sanctified – that is, made holy – by the Holy Spirit. Well, if all of that is true, then surely we can face anything with God!

It is true that we are like exiles – we actually belong somewhere else, that is in God’s Kingdom, but we are living here. The language of exile also appears in the final chapter of this letter, where Peter sends greetings from the church where he is. “Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings”.⁴ Babylon was the place where the Jews were exiled in the 6th century

⁴ 1 Peter 5:13

BC, and the name seems to be a code-word for the city of Rome, where Peter probably spent his last years as leader of the church. Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles centuries before, telling them to settle in the city where they had been taken, and to seek its welfare⁵. In chapters 2 and 3 of 1 Peter we shall see what it means to live *where* we are as people who know *who* we are.

A living hope

In addition to thinking about who we are now, Peter encourages us to set our sights on the future. The Resurrection of Jesus, he says, has changed everything for us:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. (1 Peter 1:3-4 NRSV)

Jesus died to save us from our sins, and he rose again to give us eternal life. We have an inheritance waiting for us. It's a bit like grandparents putting money in a trust for their grandchildren, which they will receive once they are grown up. Or money bequeathed in a person's will, which their beneficiaries will receive once the person dies – except that we will receive *our* inheritance in heaven when *we* die. But unlike the grandparents' trust, whose value may depend on the ups and downs of the stock market, and unlike the inheritance from a will that may be eaten into by funeral costs and taxes, our inheritance is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

Last week, on Easter Sunday, I finished my sermon by inviting us all to look death in the eye and say with St Paul,

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Corinthians 15:55,57 NRSV)

Many people think it's unhealthy or morbid to think about death. But given that is the only certain thing in life, and we'll all have to face it, I think it's much better to do so with confidence in God's promises of something much better beyond it. What God has done for us in the past, and our experience of his love now, should give us reason to think about the future with confidence.

And that is how Peter goes on in verses 8 and 9:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

⁵ Jeremiah 29:7

These words echo the story of Thomas in today's reading from John's gospel. Thomas believes after seeing, and Jesus tells him "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".⁶

If we want to grow in confidence about our faith and learn to trust God's promises, there is a simple key: nurture your relationship with God day by day. Peter gives 3 key words in verse 8: *love, believe* and *rejoice*. In your daily prayer time, and at moments during the day, thank Jesus for showing his love to you on the Cross, and tell him that you love him. For a few minutes put aside the busyness and worries of the day and centre yourself on God's presence with you. Remember that he loves you unconditionally. Tell him that you love him too. You will find that your faith and belief grow, and that joy becomes your daily companion. You will come to know what Peter calls "a living hope". It worked for me this morning. I'm sure it will work for you. We may not be able to reach out and touch Jesus physically, as Thomas did, but we can reach out and touch him spiritually in prayer. And he will touch us with his love.

All of this is what Peter describes in verse 10 as the grace of God. He goes on to say that ancient prophets wondered about it and angels would love to get to the bottom of it, but we can experience it for ourselves!

Running over

I don't know whether you related to any of the personality types that I mentioned in the Larson cartoon earlier. As you look at life, is the glass half full, half empty or the wrong thing altogether? If we centre our lives on God and trust in what he has done for us in Jesus and the inheritance he has promised us for the future, we will find that, in the words of Psalm 23, our cup is full and running over.

Concluding time of prayer and reflection

Spend a few moments reflecting on 1 Peter 1 verse 8:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.

⁶ John 20:29