

Sermon 26/4/20 – A call to Holy living!

Well, good morning to all, and welcome to the second sermon in our series on 1 Peter. This week we're going to explore Peter's "call to holy living"

Let's start with a moment of prayer: "Our father, hallowed, holy is your name, your nature your very being. As we reflect on the your written word this morning, may your living word dwell richly in us, and lead us into your holiness. Amen

PAUSE

"Holy sermons, Batman! – you're preaching on 1 Peter today!"

Well, I guess that's how Robin would have started in the old TV versions of Batman. Everything was Holy this, and Holy that, and as children we were forever exclaiming "Holy something"! Holy Smoke, and Holy Cow were common exclamations of surprise, though possibly Holy cheese may just have been my description of Emmental!

Of course in church we regularly use the word Holy in a rather more reverent way, we speak of the Holy Lord, and Holy Communion, or even legally, of our Rector as a "Clerk in Holy Orders". But what does the word Holy really mean?

Probably most would say something like "set apart, or distinctive" or even "exalted, or worthy of complete devotion". There is an undertone of reverence, of something being "other". Perhaps our minds take us into a sense of piety, of being unnaturally pure or clean, or even "holier than thou" – a sense of being looked down on.

So when at the start of our reading this morning Peter says "just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'", is this a call to become a monk or nun, and to withdraw from the world, and somehow live on another plane?

Early in the old Testament, as the people of Israel are led out from Egypt, God gives them the ten commandments, and in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus we find chapter after chapter of rules and regulations for living as God's people; rules which would make the Israelite people distinctive from the pervading culture. There were all sorts of sacrifices and

rituals for different circumstances, rules on what to eat or not to eat, rules on sexuality and relationships, rules for punishment – even rules for what to weave to make cloth – you may be interested to know that polycotton shirts and dresses were strictly forbidden!

So when Peter calls us to holy living is that what it's all about? Live by these rules and you'll be holy?

Well, when we are very little children we need simple rules to guide us, to help us to find our way – and that's what these early "rules for holy living" are – they are a framework that gives us a sense of what being holy, being distinctively for God, is about. But as the story of the old testament develops we come to the last book, Malachi, where the prophet speaks out God's rebuke to the people of Israel. They are often living out the letter of the law, but they have missed the point. Malachi makes four key points about being holy:

- First is that our worship must be fully honouring to God. He calls the people to task for bringing their second best to God. If you knew the Queen were to visit you this afternoon (current restrictions on social distancing aside) would you not quickly tidy the house, get out the best crockery, find the nice tea and the best cakes ready to be served? Well, God is visiting your house this morning.....
- Secondly he calls us to task for our personal relationships. He uses the imagery of marriage where we make solemn and unconditional promises to each other – promises of permanence and faithfulness. "I hate divorce" declares the Lord, but he's not talking about the legal process we now call divorce – he's talking about the way we break our word, we fail to live permanently and faithfully for our spouse, and we fail to live that way for God.
- The third flows from this – we fail to live with Integrity before God. We say that we love and honour Him, but our lives don't reflect this. We say we want to reflect his nature, but we fail to forgive, we are unkind, impatient, lacking in self-control. We have little secret sins as we tuck into our luxuries ignoring the poor on the street, or quietly watch a little porn, or have an extra drink, to numb our pain. God is specific here too about our attitude to money – we fail to bring the first fruits of our labour, our tithe, to the Lord.

- And the fourth too is like the others – where is our passion for justice? What are we doing to reduce the suffering of the poor, the outcast, the prisoners – how are we reaching out to the unlovely and unloveable, because that’s what God does!

You see, being Holy is not about following some set of pious rules in a glorified tick-box style, it’s about reflecting God’s nature – honouring him by giving of our best, putting him first, reflecting his faithfulness, his permanence, his integrity, and his compassion and justice!

There is real danger in thinking of being holy as somehow set apart – aloof, up there on a shelf never to be touched, because then holy becomes something ‘other’. But God’s holiness isn’t up on a shelf, locked away to be feared or run away from – God’s holiness runs towards us, calling us with real urgency like a mother calling her children – come back to me, don’t hide in the dark, come into the light – I want you to be distinctive and holy like me – then we can be in relationship, and people will see that I am God!

So is this “holiness” something I need to practice – is the problem that I’m somehow not trying hard enough – as my old school report used to say “could do better”? Is holiness something we have to work at out of blind fear that we’ll be punished if we fail to live up to the standard?

No says Peter, there is certainly discipline involved, but not fear: “prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.” The translation calls us to be “obedient children”, but the Hebrew idiom is better translated as “Be children of obedience” – be children like your father – reflect his nature.

And do this based on the sure hope we have. What is this hope, where does it come from?

My old school report of “Could do better” was written in the certain knowledge that there would be a test, an exam, which would reveal the full extent of my learning, or failure to do so!. We too live in the certain knowledge that there will be a day of reckoning, a day of judgement, when all we have done and said is laid out before us and others. Jesus himself

spoke of the day of judgement when he will sift the sheep and the goats – he will be our judge. So should we fear?

“No!” shouts Peter: “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.”

Right now we are in that wonderful season between Easter and Ascension – the time when the risen Lord Jesus came and met with his disciples on multiple occasions. Our gospel was one of the first such occasions, and on one occasion he met with 500 of them at once. The disciples knew with absolute certainty that he was alive, and risen from the dead. Peter was among those the Lord met, and indeed was commissioned by Jesus himself to go and lead what was to become the church. Look says Peter: “This was God’s plan from the very outset, that Jesus would come, die to pay the price for all the wrongdoings of your life, and then be raised from the dead to show you that you too can be raised from the dead – go and live in that hope, that certainty!” He might have added: “I have walked with him, talked with him, touched him, eaten with him – how much more evidence do you need that he is alive and raised from the dead? Now, go and live in the absolute certainty that the power of death is broken – you have been redeemed!”

And that’s the point really – we have this hope, this certainty, that Jesus has come and saved us from the power of death – that we will face judgement, and that Jesus has paid the price – we will live forever in the presence of our loving father. The call on us now is to put that hope into action in our lives!

Holy Living is about living in God’s kingdom now – being “children of obedience”, and revealing in our lives that we are children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ. And in one sense we will be “different or set apart” – we will be distinctive, radical, we won’t conform to the world around us.

As Peter says: “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born

anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.”

If we truly accept the fact of Christ’s redemption through the cross and resurrection we will live radical, different and holy lives. Because we are children of God, we will reflect his nature - honouring him by giving of our best, putting him first, reflecting his faithfulness, his permanence, his integrity, his compassion and his justice!

In a world quietened by Covid-!9, lives like this will shine out in the darkness, and bring glory to our Lord!

Holy smoke, Batman – better get on with holy living!