

A living hope by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 12th April 2026 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading(s): 1 Peter 1:1-16, John 20:19-31

Introduction: A time to look back and look forward

Today is a most unusual day for us all. It's my last Sunday working as your Rector at St Michael's Church. It's a day full of mixed emotions for both George and me and, I'm sure, for many of you. I'm not sure I've yet got my head round the fact that I'm stepping down after more than 21 years here.

There's plenty to look back on. Those of you who were here in 2004 will have seen both continuity and change. Some of those who were pillars of the church when I came have moved away or died. Others have joined us and taken their place. The biggest joy for me has been to see people come into a living faith, both adults and children. But there have been difficult times too. I've had to deal with people who didn't trust my leadership. I've had to learn how to become more available and more accountable, while managing a workload that has often seemed too great for my abilities. There are many things I would have liked to do better, and opportunities I didn't take. As St Paul wrote, we are like earthenware pots containing the treasure of the gospel. We may not be attractive, we may be fragile, but what is important is the good news of Jesus that we hold.¹ I pray that

¹ 2 Corinthians 4:7

as you look back you will see what God has done in your life and in this church and give him the glory.

But also plenty to look forward to. For George and me there is the challenge of joining a new church and a new community. What is God's vision for the church of St John the Baptist, Aldenham? What part does he want us to play in its mission?

For you at St Michael's, the future also holds many uncertainties. First of all you have to manage without a Rector for many months ahead. The leadership team have plenty of experience and expertise, but there will be times when they will have to step up to responsibilities that usually fall to the Rector. And then you have to find a new Rector, and when he or she finally takes up the post, you will have to learn to work with this person's skills and experience, as well as the areas where they are weak. And the questions that face George and me also face you: What is God's vision for St Michael's church and what part does he want each of you to play in its mission?

The letter of Peter

This sermon is about the past, the present and the future – which is how I'd like to look at our reading from the first letter of Peter. Peter is writing to a number of churches in what we now call the western half of Turkey, most of which he has probably never visited. But he is aware that many of these Christians may be having a hard time. For some of them there is certainly the lurking threat of persecution. But they also face 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. 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, 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! Peter writes to remind them of what God has done for them, and of who they are – disciples of Christ.

Following Jesus

And that, of course, is who *we* are if we consider ourselves followers of Jesus. It’s a little like “following” someone on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube or any social media app. You click on “Follow” because you want to know more about that person and get notifications of what he or she is doing or saying. But it’s more than that: being a follower of Jesus Christ is about wanting to put his teaching into practice, and to imitate him, to become more like him.

Jesus was the best human being who has ever lived, someone who showed the ultimate in kindness, integrity, courage, wisdom and compassion (and a whole lot more!). And in addition to all that, he cared for you and me so much that he was willing to be crucified for us, to take away our sins and reconcile us to God the Father.

Know who you are

In verse 2 Peter sums up the status of his readers. They are:

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.²

This doesn't just apply to these Christians in 1st century Turkey. It's a description of all Christians – that means a description of you and me. You may not think you are particularly special in human terms. But the Bible says that each of us who belong to Jesus Christ is “chosen and destined by God the Father”.

We all have different ways of describing ourselves – perhaps through the work we do, or our role in a family as a husband, wife, child, brother or sister; as a friend, or through our role in church or our membership of a sports club, gardening club or some other activity. But more important than all of these is that God is our Father, and he has chosen and destined us. And as Peter goes on in verses 3 and 4:

“By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

² 1 Peter 1:2 NRSV

and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you..."³

We have been made spiritually alive, and promised a place in heaven to be with Jesus for ever, guaranteed and reserved for us.

Today is Easter Day for Christians in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day is the single most important event in the history of the world. It showed that he was not a failed Messianic hopeful who got himself executed, or even just a prophet who was martyred for his cause. The Resurrection showed that he was indeed the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world: he offered himself on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and Almighty God, the Judge of all the earth, accepted his sacrifice and treats all who are washed in his blood as completely free of guilt, and righteous in his sight. This is the great mystery of salvation which we celebrate in this service as we share bread and wine, the symbols of his body and blood and the representation of his living presence with us.

This is what God has done for us through Jesus, this is the promise of eternal life which he has made to us, a promise which turns death from the threat of total oblivion into a gateway to an even better form of life with God in eternity.

This is the amazing grace which, Peter says in verses 10-12 the Old Testament prophets wrote about but never saw fulfilled – but we have discovered it for ourselves by the working of the Holy Spirit. We have heard the good news and believed it, we

³ 1 Peter 1:3-4 NRSV

have become members of God's chosen people, sanctified by the Spirit to be the people who follow Jesus Christ and obey him.

Feeling inadequate?

If you are a follower of Jesus, a Christian, a disciple, all of this is true for you. Are you worthy of this? No, and nor am I. Can you live up to the calling to be a disciple? No, and nor can I – not in our own strength and ability, at least. But with the help of God's Spirit within us, and with the assurance that God will forgive us every time we go wrong, yes, we can confidently call ourselves Christians. People often say that one key to success is to believe in yourself. I think I would say, put your trust in God and know who you are – a child of God, loved and cherished by your heavenly Father, and equipped by him with natural *and* supernatural abilities. God wants to do great things through you – believe it, and surrender your life to him so that he can work out his great purposes for the world through you.

When we know that God loves us, has chosen us and forgiven us and called us to follow Jesus, then the words Peter writes near the beginning of this chapter will resonate with us:

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.⁴

This echoes the words of Jesus to Thomas in the gospel reading for today. Thomas is so full of grief at the death of

⁴ 1 Peter 1:8 NRSV

Jesus that he can't dare to believe Jesus is alive. But Jesus speaks to him and to us too:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.⁵

We have not seen Jesus with our own eyes, as his first disciples did. But when we believe in him and commit our lives to him, we come to know that he loves us, and we too can experience that indescribable joy that comes from a deep peace in our hearts, and we come to love Jesus in return.

If you have not yet come to know the love of God for yourself, or if you have been wavering on the edge of believing in Jesus, don't go home and forget about what you have heard this morning. This is real, and it can be real for you too. Speak to someone who is a Christian, send an e-mail to the church office to say you'd like to find out more, seek and you will find.

Live it out

There are two messages I want to leave with you in this last sermon. The first is what I've just been saying. It's about identity: *embrace your identity as Christians*. Believe what Jesus has done for you. Know that God is your loving heavenly Father. Be filled and re-filled with the Spirit, so that you can live out your faith day by day.

But the second thing is based on verses 13-16, where Peter writes:

⁵ John 20:29 NRSV

Therefore 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. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'

My second appeal is to *live an authentic Christian life*. Being a Christian isn't just about enjoying the benefits of what God has done for us. We are called to live authentic lives as disciples of Jesus. As Paul wrote in Romans chapter 12, we need to offer our whole selves to God. Instead of conforming to the world around us with its distorted values and dysfunctional behaviours, let God transform the way we think, speak and act⁶. Or as Peter writes, "as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct"⁷.

When it comes to sexual morality, attitudes to money, economic injustice and the worship of entertainment, the world is in a complete mess, and that means people's lives are messed up too. We have a better story, a better set of values, revealed to us in the Bible and in the teaching and life of Jesus Christ.

God wants to transform the world. But to do it he needs people who are themselves transformed. So let's all live out our faith in every aspect of life. Be radical in the way you conduct your relationships, in the giving of your money, your time and your talents, in the way you reach out to people who are sick, lonely or lacking in confidence. And be bold in

⁶ Romans 12:1-2

⁷ 1 Peter 1:15 NRSV

sharing your faith openly – what’s the worst that could happen if you tell someone that God makes a difference in your life, or if you offer to pray for someone?

Knowing, growing, showing

What I’m saying is summed up in our Church Purpose, which is:

- Knowing God for ourselves
- Growing as individuals and as a church
- Showing God’s love in the world.

These are things we do as individual Christians and also in our shared life together, which gives us encouragement and inspiration. Worshipping with others on a Sunday reminds us who we are and what is really important. It helps us to put God at the centre of our lives. Here we find forgiveness for our sins, teaching about the faith and fellowship with others.

As we are told in the letter to the Hebrews,

... let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...⁸

As I finish this sermon, and as I finish off as Rector of this church, let me quote the words of former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld:

“For all that has been - thanks! For all that shall be - yes!”

Remember who you are and *embrace your identity as Christians*. Then in your families, in your work, in your leisure,

⁸ Hebrews 10:24-25 NRSV

live an authentic Christian life. And may God's blessings be upon you today and every day. Amen.