

A living hope

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 16h April 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Peter 1:1-9*, John 20:19-31

Year A (2nd Sunday of Easter)

**Lectionary has 1 Peter 1:3-9*

Introduction: a spirit of timidity?

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed, alleluia!*

I wonder how often you use that word, “alleluia”? The Easter season gives us an excuse to proclaim our faith boldly when we make that response in church. But I wonder how bold we are about our faith in our everyday living?

One of my many favourite passages in the Bible is contained in today's reading from 1 Peter:

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, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls¹.

How well does this describe you and your faith? Did you think to yourself “Amen!” as you heard that, or are you perhaps feeling a little less confident? I'm reminded of Paul's advice to Timothy in his second letter:

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a

¹ 1 Peter 1:8-9 NRSV

spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.²

Timothy is a church leader, but he too needs a bit of encouragement. This year at St Michael's has been designated a Year of Renewal. Whatever else may need renewal in our church, I am sure that our spirituality does. We need to move from a spirit of timidity to a spirit of power and love and self-control. And I think the first letter of Peter is a good place to start.

Facing challenge

Peter is writing to people who have become Christians, and are now facing some tough times. He has probably never met them, but he writes this letter to encourage them.

Right near the beginning of the letter, the author writes of the "various trials" which his readers may have to suffer³, 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"⁴.

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

² 2 Timothy 1:6-7 RSV

³ 1 Peter 1:6

⁴ 1 Peter 4:12

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, 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 mention 3 current contentious issues.

And how often do Christians in our country take the initiative to speak to someone else about Jesus? How many more people could come to know Jesus for themselves if Christians were just a little bit bolder?

Peter writes to give his readers encouragement to face their challenges with integrity, courage and hope. I believe that there is much for us 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, not only as individuals but as part of a group that we belong to. 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”.⁵ Babylon was the place where the Jews were exiled in the 6th century 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 welfare⁶. 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)

⁵ 1 Peter 5:13

⁶ Jeremiah 29:7

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.”

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.

Coming closer to God

If we are willing to trust God for the future, then this will put our daily life into perspective, as Peter says 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, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

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”.⁷

If we want to grow in confidence about our faith and learn to trust God’s promises, there are some simple things that we can do. One is to make Sunday worship a priority. When we come to church, we are setting aside time for God, time to listen to him, to worship him, to pray to him, to be strengthened spiritually by receiving communion. We are also sharing fellowship with other Christians, reminding ourselves and them that we are not alone. Some people may not be able to get to church every Sunday, due to work commitments. Some people have conflicts between worship and children’s sport or other activities. Some people think of going to church as one of a number of things you could choose to do on a Sunday morning. But if you do your best to get to church on a Sunday – or a regular weekday service if not – and if you use the singing of hymns, the prayers, the teaching as a means to get closer to God, then I guarantee God will respond to you and draw you closer to himself.

Another key thing is to 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

⁷ John 20:29

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.

Why not take a few minutes now to focus on God’s presence with us here, and in your own heart to speak to him and thank him for all that he has done for you in Jesus, and for his promise of an eternal inheritance in heaven. Then respond to his love telling him that you love him too, and that you want to enjoy each day in his presence, living with him and for him.