

Living a Holy Life

Bible reading: 1 Peter 1

Verses 1-7

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Verses 13-17

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But 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."

Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.

Sermon

"To God's elect, strangers in the world and scattered..." I guess, there is no better description of our first service back in church as I look out on God's people scattered by social distancing around the building. It is, however, great to be back here even it is very different from what we have been used to. And it is a great privilege to be preaching, even if only a part of the church are present, and to be introducing our new sermon series in 1 Peter. So, whether you are in church in person, or listening to this as a

recording you are most welcome and let us learn together from Peter – who was, of course, the first person to publicly acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah.

Peter's first letter could not be more appropriate for our times. He writes to Christians who are scattered and living in a world that is hostile to them, a world in which they feel as strangers. As we will see over the coming weeks his message to them is one of encouragement – they are God's chosen people, loved by Him and called by him for a purpose – and also a message of challenge – to live for God in whatever circumstance they find themselves, being faithful in their conduct and in their proclamation of the Gospel message.

As we delve into the letter I trust you will indeed be both encouraged and challenged and maybe I can start with a relatively easy challenge. If you have not already done so, before next Sunday, why not sit down and read the whole letter in one go – it shouldn't take you more than about ten minutes. After all, that is how you would normally read a letter you had received.

We haven't got time today to go into all the background but there is good evidence to understand that the letter was indeed written by Peter, the apostle. The Galilean fisherman, originally called Simon, who gave up everything to follow Jesus and was told by Jesus that he would be the rock on whom the church would be built. The letter is written, therefore, by an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life and ministry. It was probably written in 63AD when Peter was in Rome, some 30 years after Jesus's death and resurrection, and at a time of growing persecution of Christians under the Emperor Nero. As we see in verse 1, it was written to Christians living in various parts of the Roman Empire in what is now central and northern Turkey.

To Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. Now, we don't know how the Gospel had arrived in these areas as on the whole they were not places visited by Paul on his missionary journeys. It is possible that Peter himself took the Gospel there but that is speculation. We do, however, know that there were Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost from Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia who heard Peter's first sermon. Maybe these churches were founded by converts when they returned home from the very birth of the church. Again it's speculation. What is certain is that, in his letter, Peter is keen to encourage and challenge them. Today we will look briefly at chapter 1 and, indeed, will see there both an encouragement and a challenge.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Let's start with the encouragement which we find in verses 3 to 5.

Here Peter lays out the basics of the Christian Gospel, the message of salvation that is open to all if they put their faith in Jesus. We have been born again because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That death and resurrection has won for us eternal life as through it our sinfulness is forgiven and we have new birth. Not only do we have a

new life but it is an eternal one that cannot be taken away, one that does not perish, spoil or fade. Finally, Peter reminds us that this new life is not one we live on our own but one we will live forever with God in heaven. If we are believers in Jesus, then this is what God has given us. It is undeserved. It is free. It is given to us by God's Grace. Isn't that incredible!

What's more, Peter goes on in the next two verses of further encouragement to make the point that this is all true whatever our current circumstances. His readers were going through trials and grief given their position of being outsiders in the Roman world. Peter says that the Gospel is stronger than that – whatever we are facing (be it lockdown, isolation, ill health, loss of employment or loss of loved ones) if we remain abiding in Christ, this inheritance is ours.

In the immediately following verses Peter continues with words of encouragement and outlines what a privileged position we have, concluding that even angels long to look into these things. So, please, however you feel this morning, whatever your circumstances then put your trust in Jesus and be encouraged.

CHALLENGE

As I said at the beginning, Peter wants to give us an encouragement but also a challenge. For his challenge in Chapter 1 we turn to verses 13 to 17.

Peter starts with a "therefore". As I have said before, when we see a "therefore" in scripture we need to ask what it is there for. In this case Peter is making the point that the challenge comes because of what God has done and is doing for us. It is that way round. We don't get an encouragement from God because we have done good things. No, we seek to do what God wants because of what He has done for us. Please remember it is that way round as we look at the challenge – particularly as, initially at least, it looks an impossible one! Be holy in all you do. Be holy, because I am holy.

What on earth does this mean? First, let's think of the word "holy". In its most basic form it simply means "set apart". To be holy is not an instruction to be super-spiritual or incredibly pious it is simply a requirement to be set apart – to fix our attention wholly on God and to follow His ways rather than the ways of the world. In fact Peter has already laid this out in verses 13 and 14. In verse 13, Peter tells his readers they are to set their hope fully on Jesus Christ and in verse 14 that they are not to conform to the evil ways of the world. This is what it is to be holy.

This does not necessarily make it any easier but Peter does, at least, give us a simple route to what it means to live a holy life – set your eyes fully on Jesus and shun evil.

Interestingly, in verse 17, Peter points out that inevitably we will feel like strangers in the world simply because our focus, as a holy people, is not on this world but on God our Father.

CONCLUSION

For the rest of chapter 1, Peter goes back to encouragement and then reinforces the challenge – please do take time at home to look at that yourselves. But, for today, as we meet at this milestone for the church family in the easing of lockdown, what can we conclude?

First, that the facts of the Gospel are true whatever our circumstances, God loves us and sent Jesus to die and rise again so that we might have new life in Him. If we put our faith in Jesus the future is certain for us whatever our present circumstances – whether we are in comfort or we face trials.

Secondly, in response to what God has done we are to turn away from the ways of the world and be set apart by focussing our eyes upon Jesus. Yes, being holy 100% of the time is beyond us in this life but, in the light of what God has done for us, we should strive, with His help, to live lives that are pleasing to Him.