

Sunday 6th September 2020

Anxieties – 1 Peter 5:1-11

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Hazel Willson

Good morning. Welcome to this morning's service. We'll be thinking about Peter's advice in his first letter on how to be a humble and fruitful Christian, and the promised glory that follows the trials of life when we cast our anxieties onto God, and trust him to care for us.

A prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have promised to give strength and wisdom to those who humbly trust in you; help us to accept your gifts and welcome your Spirit into our hearts. Amen.

Now Hazel will lead us in our intercessions.

'All your anxiety, all your care – bring to the mercy-seat, leave it there
never a burden He cannot bear – never a friend like Jesus!'

So, let us come to God's throne, to His mercy-seat, with prayers for others and ourselves; knowing that He cares for us.

Loving Father, we are so aware of our lack of trust and faith in You during difficult times, and when making difficult decisions. Please forgive our stubborn independence, our failure to stand on Your promises, and our lack of love for others. Hear, and in Your gracious mercy forgive us.

Loving Father, You do not promise a life free from suffering, but You do promise never to leave or forsake us in it. Thank you that where You guide, You provide. We pray for millions throughout Your world, suffering to various degrees, not just from the covid pandemic, but also wars, natural disasters, grinding poverty and utter hopelessness. Give to Your world-wide church the courage to be Your voice, Your hands and feet – to be dispensers of Your grace wherever it is needed – be that the ends of the earth, or our local neighbourhood and community. Please take our unique gifts and help us to use them for the good of all – each one giving and receiving Your power, love and hope.

Loving Father, the world is in such turmoil and pain – yet the answer to all problems is found in You. Please guide those making far-reaching political, medical and economic decisions with Your wisdom, and give inspiration and help to those working to produce an effective vaccine. May all those who are anxious about health, homes, schooling, climate change, and so many other things, hear the good news of Your gospel, and turn from darkness to the light of Your healing presence. Thank you Father, for the numbers of people who have been actively seeking Jesus during lockdown – may they be guided to a church family where they can grow in grace.

Father, You are the same yesterday, today and for ever – yet also You are in the business of making all things new, and revealing Yourself in different ways. As the part of Your world-wide church at St John's we give thanks for the new ways we have been 'family' in recent

months. Keep us on our toes, Father, help us to look forward to the next chapter in the life of St John's, and Your person and plans for Your future. We pray for Steve, Ian and the PCC in the great responsibilities they hold, and thank you for the gifts you have given each of them. May they be worthy shepherds of Your flock at St John's – caring, leading and feeding in Your special way.

John 14:27 says: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid'. Perhaps we don't always want to trouble God with our hurts and anxieties – but we must let Him decide! He cared enough about a wedding to provide the wine; He cared enough about Peter's tax payment to give him a coin; He cared enough about the woman at the well to give her answers. Trust Him!

My favourite Bible verse 1 Peter 5:7, in the Amplified Bible says, 'Casting the whole of your care (all your anxieties, all your concerns, once and for all) on Him; for He cares for you affectionately and cares about you watchfully'. What a marvellous God we have!

We bring all these concerns in Jesus' name and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

We pray the prayer Jesus taught us;

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name
your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever, Amen

And now today's reading which is from 1 Peter 5:1-11.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

⁵In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because,

'God opposes the proud
but shows favour to the humble.'^[a]

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

⁸Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you

know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Peter, the author of these words, had been the leader of the disciples and he was now leading a local church, calling himself a fellow-elder in verse 1. He offers advice and encouragement here, in an open letter to many churches across Asia Minor, during a time of persecution but also growth. From this passage we can learn about how to live as Christians, how to operate as church members, and how to be shepherds. There's something very personal about Peter's words too as they carry all kinds of references to particular experiences that he had undergone, which were described in the gospels – they were personal to him but his words can feel personal to us as well, so I hope they can reach into our hearts and minds as well.

He writes 'to the elders among you' but don't think 'It's not about me because I'm not on the PCC', because we are all leaders who set an example of Christian living, whether in church, in our families, at work, or among friends, and we all share in the great hope that Peter reminds us of three times: 'the glory to be revealed...you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade' and 'God called you to his eternal glory'. He had seen the transfiguration of Jesus and knew that we have been invited into God's presence too.

'Be shepherds of God's flock' he tells us in verse 2, again echoing his personal experience when he was told three times by the risen Christ to 'feed my sheep'. His essential message about shepherding is to care for others, not ourselves, and to do so eagerly. Everyone has a role in a church family, and shepherds care for their flock, guard them, look ahead and move forward to new pastures. We should all do the same and hope to serve God more effectively and faithfully in Penge.

Paul advised Timothy when he began his role as church leader to 'be diligent so that everyone may see your progress'. Timothy and Paul were pioneers, and you may have experienced how, when a church leader won't step forward, the church will not move forward either. What happens then is that God permits trials to appear that force the church to progress. Peter had learned this. For example, he didn't want Jesus to wash his feet and argued about it. He had learned to be both 'over' and 'among' his fellow believers, 'not lording it over but being examples' as he puts it here. When Jesus had put on a towel to wash his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, he had literally 'clothed himself with humility', Peter's words here, as he donned the garment of a servant.

Peter quotes a proverb in verse 6 that sums up God's moral rule – he opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Pride is the first sin because it is a desire to take control, to take over from God. The cure for it is to yield to God, and the evidence that you have done so is the grace of God operating in your life. This will appear clearly when we trust God to direct our lives, and He uses us to work out His purposes. When we submit to God, that is 'be humble', we receive grace, and we will submit to each other so that we can serve. Don't fear someone taking advantage of you when you are operating under God's mighty hand, and you won't even dream of taking advantage of someone else when you are doing His will.

There may be difficulties along the way, the thorn in the flesh, but this is why Peter assures us 'Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time' (in verse 6). The final phrase 'in due time' is important because the willingness to wait seems to be part of the humbling. God exalts someone when they are ready for it, when they are dependent on him. Moses was 80, after waiting 40 years from the time when he first tried to become a leader and defender of the Jewish people; Joseph was a slave and a prisoner for at least 13 years before he rose to power in Egypt. We have to be patient, and this year has been a time when all people have had to learn to wait and hope, even Presidents and Prime Ministers.

There is, though, a great promise attached to this time of patience, this humbling through suffering described in verses 5 and 6, and it is seen in verse 7: 'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you'. If we do act as verses 5 and 6 tell us, then we receive the benefit – God will take care of us. When times are hard, we can become anxious and miss God's blessing. Notice that Peter wrote 'Cast all your anxiety on him'. If we keep part of our worries to ourselves, then worry can become part of everyday life, and we end up thinking 'That worry has passed by – now where's the next one?' Instead we have to keep God's inward peace so that we can face trials, be witnesses different to the frantic world, and receive the promised glory. It is all our cares; don't let little cares turn into big problems.

In the gospels we read how Peter saw God care for him in things great and small. Jesus healed his mother-in-law, gave him a huge catch of fish, paid his temple tax, empowered him to walk on water, healed the damage he had done to the high priest's servant's ear, and even released him from prison. When we entrust our cares to God, he promises to help us in several ways. He will strengthen us. 'Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand'. That is a verse we heard recently in our readings from Isaiah, and a great promise. Another way is found in James: 'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault'. As well as strength and wisdom to cope, he gives us the faith to trust him: 'Commit your way to the Lord; trust him to do this' (that's Psalm 37). This isn't the same as letting God do everything; he will work in us as well as work for us, so we have to welcome his Spirit and allow him to sustain us and use us.

It can be hard to be self-controlled when things go wrong, but Peter advises us to do so, and to 'be alert'. He had failed in Gethsemane when he was asked to watch and pray, and he knew the pain of not resisting evil in faith. He tried to lie his way through after Jesus' arrest, saying 'I don't know the man!' These temptations to find our own way, to discuss and compromise with evil, like Eve in Eden, are universal and shared by 'your brothers through the world'. We must resist, but how? The same way that Jesus resisted in the desert, in Luke 4, when he tested lies against the Word of God.

The final two verses offer us a picture of the Christian character that God wants for us, however different we may be as individuals: 'he will himself restore you, and make you strong, firm and steadfast'. Peter assures us that God will replace our transitory troubles, 'after you have suffered a little while', with 'his eternal glory in Christ', reminding us that God is in control of difficult trials, but these lead to hope.

A humble heart is a heart that is established in God, firmly fixed, and not shifted by persecution or led away by false teaching. The strength promised to a humble heart

empowers us to act, based on settled faith. We have great hope. We can cast all our anxieties onto our Saviour. And we can trust that, as verse 11 says in the Message version, 'He gets the last word'.

A prayer to finish.

Lord, please help us to cast all our anxieties on to you, that we may trust in your care and receive your glory as faithful servants. Amen.

To conclude this morning, a final blessing.

The Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you,
the Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.