

Sunday 2nd May 2021

1 Peter 1:1-12 (Be hopeful)

Talk by Russ Jones, Prayers by Hazell

Good morning. We are starting our new sermon series today, reading through the book of 1st Peter, and I'd like to help us prepare for our worship, prayer, and hearing of God's word by reading a verse that appears towards the end of the book. In it Peter speaks about how we feel during times of trial, especially of persecution.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

We will share in Peter's encouragement later. The home groups are going to follow the same passages and the accompanying guide is called 'Good Reasons for Hope'. This sums up the book of 1st Peter well. A short prayer for us:

Father, we bring ourselves before you this morning, thanking you for making us as we are; Jesus, we praise you for your saving death and resurrection; Spirit, we ask that you reach into our hearts and minds, bringing us a taste of your glory. Amen.

Now Hazel will lead us in our intercessions.

Prayers

Our loving Father God – we are sorry for our failures to listen to You and others, to love, to forgive, and to grow in Your grace. We confess the things we have done, said and thought that we should not have done – and all the ways in which we have omitted to obey Your commands, and do what is right. Forgive us we pray, our despair at the trials of life, and our stifling of the hope that should forever well up in us in response to Your salvation. Give us a renewed vision of the joy that awaits us through Your forgiveness.

In Romans 12 we are reminded to be 'joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer'.

Gracious Father, thank you for all that gives us joy, peace and hope in our daily lives. May we see each new day as a blank canvas on which we gradually decipher Your plans as they unfold – and keep our hands constantly in Yours, and our ears tuned to Your voice, and help us remember that life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's learning to sing in the rain!

So Father, we bring some of the people and situations that concern us, and lay them at the foot of the cross.

We pray for all those lands and peoples in despair because of covid-19. We particularly lift up the people of India and Brazil. Give wisdom to their political leaders, and strength and stamina to medical workers, where the crisis in numbers threatens to overwhelm hospitals and infrastructure. We also pray for many countries suffering beyond the headlines, both

from the virus and in other ways. For Yemen, Syria, Mozambique and Nigeria among many. Bring hopes of a lasting peace and economic security – and people to stand in the gap, and help bring reconciliation and restoration of shattered lands and lives.

Father, we give You thanks for all those who bring hope in Your name, in various circumstances. Tracey Day, serving in Thailand says that the Thai word for disappointment is 'pid wang', meaning a wrong hope – and we give thanks, with her, that You are the only sure hope. May Your beleaguered church, in places where the foundations of faith are being attacked – know that You are the firm Rock buried beneath, and we praise You for the awesome way Your church grows despite persecution and suffering.

Father, we pray for the Anglican church, and the three recent reports on Safeguarding; Racism; and Sexuality. We lament Father, that these have been necessary, but we pray that as these difficult and sensitive subjects are opened up and discussed hope may be brought to those who have long been denied it. Give us a heart and love like Yours, and heal Your church we pray.

Father, as we open our church today, we rejoice, and we pray for those who will attend and for Ian as he leads the service. We thank you for the many years that St John's and Holy Trinity have faithfully witnessed to this area. Guide us as we draw closer together, be with Nick Read as he prepares for retirement, and with Your choice of a person to lead and serve us in the future.

We pray Father, for all those individuals who have been brought through times of trial this year, and those still suffering, particularly Will, Kath and Sam, Val and John, Yvette and Zak, Andy, and others. Give them Your hope to sustain and guide them. We also pray for the 2 girls who were stabbed last weekend, in West Norwood, and their families, for Nazanin, in Iran, whose hopes of release were dashed this week, and for those in Israel, grieving for those who died in the crush on Friday.

*There is a hope that burns within my heart
That gives me strength for every passing day;
A glimpse of glory, now revealed in meagre part, yet drives all doubt away.
I stand in Christ, with sins forgiven,
And Christ in me the hope of heaven;
My highest calling and my deepest joy, to make His will my home.*

Lord of heaven and earth, as Jesus taught His disciples to be persistent in prayer – give us patience and courage never to lose hope, but always to bring our prayers before You; through Jesus Christ our Lord – who taught us when we pray to say :-

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name
Your kingdom come, Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and 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

Reading - 1 Peter 1.1-12

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

³ 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, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ 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. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Sermon

Moving into our new sermon and home group series on this book, we leave the Easter readings behind, but 1st Peter follows so naturally from the Easter events that it seems a direct continuation. This book is full of hope, inspired by Peter's loving encounters with the resurrected Jesus. Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times before the crucifixion and then been asked by Jesus 'Do you truly love me?' three times after the resurrection to fully put right his denials and allow him to feel forgiven. An overwhelming sense of love informs this book as Peter encourages us to trust in the hope we have been given, even when there are persecutions or other kinds of suffering in our lives.

Peter begins by announcing himself as the author and tells us the audience who would have received and heard this letter. 'Peter, an apostle of Christ' is his first line. His original name was Simon, but he was given the name Peter by Jesus after he declared his faith, and he is often called Simon Peter in the gospels. His old nature, Simon, was replaced by his new

nature, Peter, and now he is fully Peter, fully living for Christ and in Christ. The name Peter means 'rock' in Greek, so in English it was like Jesus saying 'Simon, you will be called Rocky', though he was impetuous and unstable at first, not rock-like, later becoming one of the key supporters of the first church, a pillar of the church if you like. He calls himself 'an apostle of Jesus Christ' here, reminding us that he was humble, just one of the group, and never the first bishop of Rome or any of the other silly titles invented for him that he would have found embarrassing.

The letter is sent to the Christians scattered across Asia Minor, now Turkey, called 'God's elect, strangers in the world'. Peter's mission was to Jewish Christians while Paul went to Gentiles, and he is primarily addressing dispersed Jews, imagining them as he writes, though of course the churches in all the places mentioned had Gentile believers too. Christians now are 'strangers in the world' because they can appear strange in their values, and perhaps in the words or actions that result from those different values. Persecution was growing at the time, this letter being written in about 60AD when Roman rule no longer saw Christians as part of the tolerated Jewish religion but as an illegal sect, and Nero was beginning to spread lies about Christians and use them as scapegoats; to get the idea, think of the hate press in our country stirring up dislike of and violence against anyone who doesn't fit their idea of a perfect Briton.

Trials are coming and Peter reminds them, and us, that they have hope. It isn't a weak 'I hope so' when something looks unlikely, but an assurance of future glory and blessing. Human glory doesn't last long but our works for God's glory will last eternally, and Peter explains how the Trinity that is the single God has created and chosen us, the work of God the Father; drawn and empowered us, the work of God the Spirit; and shown how to live and saved us, the work of God the Son. It is an unusual order where the Spirit is mentioned first, drawing us to faith in the Son, but this fits with the key idea that we are set apart from the world, chosen, as Peter writes, 'for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood'. This familiar but contradictory image of being washed clean by Jesus' blood comes from the exodus of Israel, when God's chosen people escaped from slavery in Egypt. At Mount Sinai, Moses received the commandments, built an altar, and made a sacrifice. Then, and this is Exodus chapter 24, 'Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you'. The sprinkling with blood is accomplished inwardly now through trusting in Jesus – the Old Testament ritual is no longer necessary. The promised Messiah has suffered in our place and now we can receive 'grace and peace in abundance'. It isn't our own doing. God chose us, saved us, and gave us the power and understanding to walk in faith. He also gave us the power to speak of God's salvation, as Peter had done at Pentecost.

The words of praise that Peter uses: 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' begin a Jewish liturgical form known as the Standing Prayer, reminding both Jews and Gentiles in this context that they have been given 'new birth into a living hope' through the resurrection. Why a 'living hope'? It comes about through the Son rising from the dead. The

hope has life in it, meaning it grows as time passes, unlike earthly hopes that are destroyed by time. Christian hope becomes stronger, more glorious, as time passes. It is called 'an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you'. Faith isn't just a gift from God; it is a share in his glory – this is the inheritance he shares with us. Jesus included us as beneficiaries in his will. Not only is the glory kept for us, but we are shielded by God's power until we receive it – we are kept for the glory! The verb 'shielded' is in continuous tense – we are being shielded constantly, and not by our own strength.

Romans 8 tells us the same thing: 'those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified'. That says that we have been made right with God through Jesus' death, and have already been glorified. If a believer loses faith, then God is robbed of glory. The hope means that we rejoice, we worship joyfully, 'though now we suffer grief in all kinds of trials'. Verse 7 is one of those verses worth remembering, to help us when we face troubles. 'Trials have come so that your faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour'. Trials prepare us for spiritual growth, and prepare us to meet future needs. This is why they come in 'all kind of' forms because life brings many varied tests of our faith, and of our strength. This might make them sound easy but they're not. They can be heavy to bear, producing sorrow. We're not to pretend everything is alright, putting on a front to look more spiritual, or perhaps to avoid discouraging others. We are to be honest and accept that trials are painful. They are though controlled by God and do not last forever. This may be why Peter uses the image of a goldsmith refining metal in a furnace.

The goldsmith won't waste his precious ore. He'll smelt it for just long enough to remove the impurities and then mould it into a beautiful, valuable article. The ancient guide to how long the smith should leave the metal in the furnace was until he could see his face reflected in it. When we're in the furnace, God wants to see the face of Jesus, his glory and beauty in us. The assayer comes and tests the genuineness of the article, to see whether it's pure gold or counterfeit. Our faith, refined by the fire of trials, will be tested. Let me make it clear that I am not saying all of life's troubles are deliberately created by God to cause us pain. Absolutely not. Other people, random situations beyond our control, our own failings, all these can lead to trials, but whatever the cause of the trial, God invites us to respond with faith and hope.

Born for glory, shielded for glory, prepared for glory – great news! But even better is Peter's assertion that follows. It's not 'pie in the sky when you die' – it's dynamic, it's living, it's now. Suffering can be turned into glory here. When we believe in Christ, we are filled with joy, 'an inexpressible joy' is how Peter puts it because it goes beyond words, something indefinable and deep. Perhaps the Transfiguration is a picture of it when Jesus was transformed in preparation, even though he would shortly face arrest, torture, and crucifixion. If we are suffering a trial, and we lift our hearts to God, it takes the poison from the experience and begins to heal us, but if we don't, it will bring out the worst in us and the fire will burn, not purify us. 'Though you have not seen him, you love him' reminds me of

the passage we heard after Easter when Jesus appeared to Thomas, who had refused to believe in the resurrection. Jesus told him: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' Peter was present that day and it obviously made a lasting impression on him. Romans 8.28 promises that 'in all things God works for the good of those who love him', but it doesn't promise that we will see why things are happening or how they work together for good. We have to trust in him we love for that. Then we are receiving salvation, a foretaste of God's glory. The Old Testament prophets foretold the suffering of the Messiah and eventual salvation glory, but they didn't understand the connection between the two, unsurprisingly since the disciples didn't get it either, even though Jesus had personally explained to them.

We have the living word of God in the Bible, and that includes the Old Testament where we can meet Jesus in the law, the messages given through Israel's history, the Psalms, poetry, and prophets, as well as the New Testament. The Spirit teaches us and sustains us when we 'look into these things', and even angels long to look into them. Imagine an angel stooping down to watch us, amazed at what they discover of God's glory and purpose in his church.

Blessing

As we take our worship, praise and prayer and carry it into our daily lives, may our lives be sustained through the love of our Heavenly Father. May we feel the presence of our Saviour walking beside us, and know the power of the Spirit in both our actions and our words.
Amen.