

Sunday 23rd March 2021

1 Peter 2:11-17 (Be free)

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Hazel Willson

Good morning and welcome to St Johns on-line reflection. Today, we will be focusing on 1 Peter 2:11-17. First, Hazel will read the prayers.

Prayers

Let us pray:

2 Corinthians chapter 3 v17 says, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'

Loving Father, as we celebrate the birthday of your church, give us, we pray the joy and exuberance which the apostles experienced on that fantastic day. Thank you that Your Spirit's coming released them from their fear and timidity, and gave them the courage and freedom to speak for You, despite the authorities trying to stop them. Give us, we pray, that same boldness; free our hearts and our lips to obey You above all things – to celebrate Your victory, to revel in Your love, to rejoice that You have set us free, and that Your death has brought us life.

Father of all mercies, we confess that despite the precious gift of Your Spirit, we still try to go our own way. Despite the freedom won for us by Christ, we so often live in fear, or become proud of our own achievements. Show us that Your Spirit's presence gives freedom, help us to use that freedom wisely, and grant us Your forgiveness.

God of peace, we pray for all areas of conflict; for countries and people caught in a cycle of ungrace. We particularly lift the situation between Israelis and Palestinians to You, and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and an end to violence. We remember too, Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, Mali, Ethiopia, and so many other places. Please Father, raise up peacemakers for these areas.

In many of these places, and in others, Your special people often bear the brunt of hatred, and we ask for our brothers and sisters in Christ, that they may know the experience of inner freedom, although they may be in chains, literally and emotionally. May their reaction to suffering and persecution be as that of Jesus; and may their actions and words show only Your love and goodness.

Holy Father, enable Your people, Your church, wherever they are, to be upright and worthy citizens. We pray for governments, leaders, and all who hold authority and power – that under Your control and guidance, they may exercise that power for the good and the freedom of all their people.

God of the poor, we pray for all who are downtrodden, destitute, jobless, homeless, sick and grieving – and for the many organisations and individuals who work on their behalf. We pray for CAP, Amaze Penge, the Foodbanks, and Living Well particularly, bringing freedom from debt, hunger, and many other challenges of daily life – showing Your love in practical ways.

Loving Father, we continue to give thanks for the different ways our two churches are getting to know each other and work together, and we pray that Your Holy Spirit will oversee the whole process of appointing Your choice of vicar to lead and serve us in the future.

We thank You God of comfort and healing, for the relative freedoms that the vaccination programme has brought. Enable us to be patient, and wise with Your wisdom as lockdown eases – we pray for those who still have to make decisions for others, and for all whose livelihood and mental health has been badly affected during this pandemic. We remember those known personally to us. We pray for Will, Kath and Sam; for Andy, and Anthony, Val, Gerese and others, to be freed from the power of the evil one, and know total healing, wholeness and joy. We pray Your guidance and peace for Catherine, looking for a job, and for Maria, waiting for hospital results, and we praise You for the healing You have already brought about for Betty and others.

We conclude with the words of a hymn:

Freedom and life are ours, for Christ has set us free,
Never again submit to powers that lead to slavery.
Christ is the Lord who breaks our chains, our bondage ends;
Christ is the Rescuer who makes the helpless slaves His friends.

Called by the Lord to use our freedom and be strong,
not letting liberty excuse a life of blatant wrong.
Freed from the law's stern hand, God's gift of grace to prove,
Know that the law's entire demand is gladly met by love.

Spirit of God, come fill, emancipate us all;
Speak to us, word of truth, until before Your feet we fall.
Glory and liberty our Father has decreed,
And if the Son shall make us free, we shall be free indeed!

Thank you Father for those amazing truths and promises, and we bring all these prayers and praises to You in the precious name of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading

Our reading today is taken from 1 Peter, Chapter 2, verses 11-17. New International Version (NIV)

1 Peter 2:11-17. New International Version

Living Godly Lives in a Pagan Society

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

Talk

'Live as free people', is the start of verse 16. What does it mean to us to be free? Do we see ourselves as living free? Peter was writing to the Jewish Christians at a time where they were not free socially or geographically. In verse 1 they are addressed as 'foreigners and exiles'. They were literally 'guests and temporary residents' in the Roman Empire. They were people without rights and without a permanent residence in the Roman Empire. They were socially excluded from privilege and power, and made worse by their conversion.

In all this Peter encourages them to live honorably, to abstain from sinful desires, from entangling themselves in difficult situations and instead to lead good lives. There were several reasons for this. One in that leading good lives especially in their situation was important as even in the smallest of issues, injustice could happen with no recourse for them to justice or to power, and in living godly lives would put to silence any false charges raised against them. Peter also wanted them to live an exemplary life to provide an attractive alternative to the pagan way of life around them. They were bearing witness to the gospel when they lived in a way that pleased God.

Today we, too, are called to have good conduct to live holy lives among unbelievers. We are to abstain from sinful passions, and as they may be enticing nonetheless, hence we have a battle on our hands, for these sins as it says in verse 11 'wage war against our soul' and negatively impacts our spiritual life. In us doing good deeds, some unbelievers will come to join the church. As in Matthew 5:16 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your God works and glorify your father in heaven', whether it is now

or at the end of times. Even for those that are hostile to us we are to be consistent in our conduct, as the day may come when those who criticize us will praise God with us.

After Peter has encouraged the believers to lead a life of integrity, he says in verse 13, to 'submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority', which included the emperor, and the governors, who were sent by the Emperor 'to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.' The word submit comes from the Greek word *hypo* (meaning under), and *tasso* (meaning to order, place, appoint), and so 'to order oneself under', or to live according to the governmental order'. Put another way; Christians are to be subject to every authority. To be clear, what this did not mean was total submission, and also that being subject to the government was secondary to obeying God.

Even though the Christians were foreigners and strangers they were to live in the order that God had ordained. There were times where the Israelites and the early Christians acted in civil disobedience when the demands of society overrode the demands of the Lord, for example in the Book of Daniel, when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gods or the image of gold he had set up, and as a result were thrown into the furnace, from which God then delivered them. There is a balance here, and whilst the Christians were not free being aliens and strangers, they were free with respect to authorities, and *normally* this freedom manifested itself in respect and loyalty, submission, and honour.

How do we apply this encouragement from Peter of godly lives and respect to authority to our lives today? Today, some Christians live in freedom while others due to their faith live under repressive governments. It is the same in that we are to be subject to authority 'for the Lord's sake' - so that his Good News and his people will be respected. If we are to be persecuted, it should be for obeying God, not for breaking moral or civil laws. (See Roman's 13.1). What Peter wants from his churches (and what God wants for his people) is a heart focused on him, a behaviour focused on love and obedience, and a lifestyle of good conduct in the sight of non-Christians.

Whilst the Jewish Christians were not free socially or geographically, they were 'to live as free people, but to not use their freedom as a cover-up for evil, but to live as God's slaves' (verse 16). To explore this, firstly if we look at it in practical terms. The believers were to live good lives that glorified God, and not to follow sinful desires, they were not to be surprised by the accusation of wrongdoing, they were to have respect for authority, and were to treat everyone you meet with dignity.

How is this possible when they and we are sinful human beings? Peter's answer is to point to Jesus. As believers we have received God's mercy. Jesus used his servant body to carry our sin to the Cross so we could be rid of sin, and free to live the right way. Jesus changes everything. Peter draws from Isaiah 53, which prophesies the way in which the Messiah will die in place of his people. And this is how we are brought back in

the presence of God. At the cross, the place of suffering has become the place of salvation.

Christians are free because they have been redeemed. We are free in serving God, and hence to be God's slave was in Peter's time, and is today, freedom. Christians live under the governing authority as free people, not as its slaves, for we are slaves of God. Freedom in Scripture is not a license to sin but expresses itself in devotion to what is good. Christians ought to *choose* to be orderly.' Martin Luther summarises Peter's point well.

'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all'.

As believers, we are the people of God, and so, as in verse 1 of the passage, we are 'temporary residents and foreigners' in this world because our real home is with God. Heaven is where God lives. Life in heaven operates according to God's principles and values, and it is eternal and unshakeable. As we learn in the Old Testament, the Kingdom of Heaven came to earth in the symbolism of the Jewish sanctuary (the Tabernacle and Temple) where God's presence dwelt. Later, as captured in the New Testament, it came in a fuller way in the person of Jesus Christ. 'God with us'. And at Pentecost, as we celebrate today, the gift of the Holy Spirit came upon his people, and it spread through the entire world as the Holy Spirit came to live in every believer.

Someday, after God judges and destroys all sin, the Kingdom of Heaven will rule every corner of this earth. John saw this day in a vision, and he cried out. 'Look God's home is now among his people! He will live for them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them (Revelation 21:3). Our true loyalty is to be to our citizenship in heaven, not to our citizenship here, because the earth will be destroyed. In V11 in the Message version it says: 'Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it'. Our loyalty is to be to God's truth, his way of life, and his dedicated people. It is because we are loyal to God, we often will feel like strangers in a world that would prefer to ignore God. In our loyalty to God as in verse 17, we are to show proper respect to everyone. All people deserve the same honour and respect as the Emperor. Only God is to be feared. Believers are to have a tender love to each other as members of the same global family.

As we close a reflection; to do God's will, to seek holiness is a thirst, it is a drive to know God in his fullness and an unashamed commitment to obey God whatever it costs and wherever we are. Only when the Christian message about self-denial is heard will the grace of God be heard in its fullness, and only when the holiness of God is displayed will his grace be clearest.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, thank you that in you we find the ultimate freedom. No matter what our challenging circumstances are, through your Holy Spirit, you are with us every step of the way. Help us in faith to live our lives in accordance to your will, so that others may come to know you, to know of your love and to be set free, to the glory and praise of your Holy name, Amen.

Closing Prayer:

May the grace of God uphold you,
the peace of God surround you,
the love of God flow from you
and the strength of God protect
and bring you safely through this day.