

Scripture for Sunday April 26 2020

1 Peter 1:3-9;13-23 (The Bible For Everyone)

³ May God be blessed, God the father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah! His mercy is abundant, and so he has become our father in a second birth into a living hope through the resurrection from the dead of Jesus the Messiah. ⁴This has brought us into an incorruptible inheritance, which nothing can stain or diminish. At the moment it is kept safe for you in the heavens, ⁵ while you are being kept safe by God's power, through faith, for a rescue that is all ready and waiting to be revealed in the final time.

⁶ That is why you celebrate! Yes, it may well be necessary that, for a while, you may have to suffer trials and tests of all sorts. ⁷ But this is so that the true value of your faith may be discovered. It is worth more than gold, which is tested by fire even though it can be destroyed. The result will be praise, glory and honour when Jesus the Messiah is revealed. ⁸ You love him, even though you've never seen him. And even though you don't see him, you believe in him, and celebrate with a glorified joy that goes beyond anything words can say, ⁹ since you are receiving the proper goal of your faith, namely, the rescue of your lives.

¹³ So fasten your belts – the belts of your minds! Keep yourselves under control. Set your hope completely on the grace that will be given you when Jesus the Messiah is revealed. ¹⁴ As children of obedience, don't be squashed into the shape of the passions you used to indulge when you were still in ignorance. ¹⁵ Rather, just as the one who called you is holy, so be holy yourselves, in every aspect of behaviour. ¹⁶ It is written, you see, 'Be holy, for I am holy.' ¹⁷ If you call on God as 'father' – the God, that is, who judges everyone impartially according to their work – behave with holy fear throughout the time in which you are resident here.

¹⁸ You know, after all, that you were ransomed from the futile practices inherited from your ancestors, and that this ransom came not through perishable things like gold or silver, ¹⁹ but through the precious blood of the Messiah, like a lamb without spot or blemish. ²⁰ He was destined for this from before the foundation of the world, and appeared at the end of the times for your sake, ²¹ for you (that is) who through him believe in the God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

²² Once your lives have been purified by obeying the truth, resulting in a sincere love for all your fellow believers, love one another eagerly, from a pure heart. ²³ You have been born again, not from seed which decays but from seed which does not – through the living and abiding word of God.

Sermon: New Life, New Lifestyle

The Church Lectionary assigns the letter of 1 Peter for this season of Easter, probably because it rests squarely on the good news message of the death and resurrection of Jesus. More generally, the New Testament letters are very different from the Gospels and that can make them difficult to understand at first glance. That's because it's like one hearing a half of a conversation and we have to try and intelligently surmise the context and purpose for such correspondence.¹ One thing that's always true when letters are written, they are a poor substitute for being there in person! Even so, at this time of present isolation, we can better appreciate that letters and other forms of communication are still to be highly valued.

Before we get into today's passage, it's worth spending a few moments giving some background information. Although the letter self-identifies its author as the apostle Peter, we can't be sure of that. It *could* be that Simon Peter wrote it from Rome prior to his martyrdom under Emperor Nero, in the mid-60s A.D., and before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But there are also good reasons to think that this letter was written about 20 years later by someone who wanted to venerate Peter and his legacy.² However, that information does not alter the interpretation of the text! The letter was written primarily to non-Jewish Christians³ in the region we would call Turkey today. As such it was a *general* letter that would be circulated to *all* the churches and read out loud. The Christians in those towns and cities were generally treated with suspicion, even despised.⁴ That's because they refused to worship the local deities or honour Caesar.⁵ This would create tension within the community and within households - between husbands and wives, and between owners and their slaves. Christians were also perceived as *secretive* because they met in each other's homes. People sometimes thought the worst and assumed adulterous affairs were taking place, and rumours of Holy Communion sounded like cannibalism. It is to *counter* such a perception that the author exhorts the faithful to conduct themselves *honourably*.⁶ The key question, then, is *how* should Christians behave and relate to the wider culture that does not share its values? And that is a timely and relevant question for us today in 21st-century Canada. On that note, the author describes his readers as "exiles," or resident aliens,⁷ as strangers in a strange land.⁸ Although the letter was written to *non*-Jewish Christians,⁹ such language is reminiscent of the Babylonian exile¹⁰ and of the wilderness wandering in the time of Moses. This

¹ We saw that in our Bible Study on *Galatians*. The background context is deduced and discovered by scholarly research.

² For instance, the Greek prose of one Peter is fairly sophisticated for someone who is reputed to be a Galilean fisherman; is this possible? (See also [12] and [37].) This literary technique is not deceptive or lying if everyone knew Peter was dead!

³ See 1 Pet 1:14, 18; 4:3-4.

⁴ But *not* necessarily physically persecuted, though that depends critically on the date.

⁵ Just like the Jews for that matter. The Greco-Roman pagans could tolerate anything except intolerance! And Christians and Jews were seen as supremely intolerant.

⁶ 1 Pet 2:12.

⁷ *Resident Aliens* is the title of an important book by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon.

⁸ 1 Pet 1:1,17; 2:11. See also Exod 2:22.

⁹ Though not exclusively so.

¹⁰ With the new Babylon being Rome; 1 Pet 5:13. Even so, the writer considers such *Gentile* "exiles" as children of God - see multiple mention of "Father" in 1 Pet 1.

doesn't literally mean they *were* foreigners, although no doubt some were because slaves were bought and sold in the international marketplace. Rather, it is because of their conversion to Christianity they *became*, in effect, social outcasts¹¹ and their alienation was a mark of their faithfulness to Jesus. Our Western culture today, despite its pride in political correctness, is hardly neutral toward Christianity. Some of you may experience this in your places of work or within your social circles. Talk about "spirituality" is acceptable; talk about "Jesus" is suspect. This letter was written as a word of *encouragement* for Christians in precisely these circumstances. Let's see what the writer has to say.

The letter begins with praise and reminds these resident aliens of their valued status in *God's* eyes. God is "*our Father*" and by his great *mercy* he has given us a *new birth* into a *living hope* through the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ from the dead."¹² It is the Easter message that gives *us* a new identity, one that is affirmed in our baptism because as we go down into the waters, we die to the old life and, as we come up, we are born again into the new life of the Spirit and made a new creation.¹³ The writer doesn't address his audience in terms of their morals, or social status, or their wealth, or poverty. Those are distinctions of the old creation, the old life. Our new life begins and is based upon the death and resurrection of Christ. A modern way to view this is that we are *dual* citizens, we are simultaneously inhabitants of *this* world *and* citizens of *God's new World*, which – the writer says - will be eventually unveiled.¹⁴ This good news is *living* hope or hope that gives *life*! Moreover, he says this new birth "has brought us into an incorruptible inheritance, which nothing can stain or diminish."¹⁵ This new life isn't just about *individuals* being transformed, but *whole communities*. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright says it is even more than that: "God is building a new creation which at the moment is out of sight, behind the thin invisible curtain¹⁶ which separates our world from God's world. At the end of time, the curtain will be drawn back and the incorruptible inheritance will be seen for all it's worth."¹⁷ I find description of parallel worlds a beautiful image, one that tries to depict our dual citizenship *and* portrays God as close by, *not* distant.¹⁸ Our faith, then, is the anchor that holds us firm in that future hope and, because of which, we can rejoice, even if life is hard right now.

I explained earlier why life was hard for them. Life can be tough for us too. Right now, COVID is the main reason we are finding life so challenging. This is an example of the kind of suffering that occurs

¹¹ This was likely compounded by their inferior status: slaves – 1 Pet 2:18–25, and women – 1 Pet 3:1–6 owned by, or married to, non-Christian men.

¹² 1 Pet 1:3 (NTFE). The death of Jesus is mentioned earlier in 1 Pet 1:2. (See also Titus 3:5.)

¹³ This baptismal imagery is likely implied here. See also Rom 6:1-14; 2 Cor 5:17. (There *are* Pauline themes in this letter of "Peter.")

¹⁴ 1 Pet 1:5b.

¹⁵ 1 Pet 1:4 (NTFE). The basis of this *incorruptible* inheritance is the novel kind of body of the resurrected Jesus. See also Eph 1:11–14 – again echoes of Paul here; see [12].

¹⁶ Cf. the vision of Jacob's ladder in Gen 28:10-17 and John 1:51.

¹⁷ 1 Pet 1:5,9. N.T. Wright's words are adapted from his "For Everybody. . ." commentary on 1 Peter.

¹⁸ Robert Jewett expresses the same sentiment in the context of Rom 8:18-27: "Our weakness" (v26) refers to the believer's vulnerable position of being caught between two ages, knowing enough of the coming age to yearn for it (along with the rest of creation) but continuing to be assaulted by the principalities and powers of the old age of the flesh." Jewett, *Romans*, 522.

through nature, along with other diseases, earthquakes, famines, tornadoes, hurricanes and the like. We are also acutely aware that life is brutal right now for those who have been impacted by this terrible mass shooting in Nova Scotia. That is an example of the kind of suffering that arises through human beings, and other examples of that are wars, terrorism, physical and emotional abuse, etc. Let's be absolutely clear, God does *not* send COVID or cancer and *nor* does God *will* mass murder. However, that's *not* the kind of suffering that the author is referring to in this letter. Rather, it is the suffering that is a *direct* consequence of being a Christian.¹⁹ This kind of suffering could include being disinherited or thrown out of your home, having your business boycotted, or more generally being bullied or ostracized simply for your faith. The writer is encouraging them to stay true during such trials, and to see them as a refining fire that tests the *quality* of their faith.²⁰ None of us like the sound of that! Just like no one wants to experience suffering - however it's caused, so no one wants to be persecuted for their faith. It's also important to recognize that God does *not* send these kinds of trials either.²¹ Nevertheless, if Jesus is our example then, just as he suffered, so we can anticipate that following in his footsteps will inevitably result in hardships for us.²² And this will naturally check the genuineness of our faith. The writer also tries to be encouraging and says that God is *protecting* us *in* our trial.²³ If we are honest, we seriously wonder about that in the middle of our crises and sufferings. I suggest that such a perspective is only possible with hindsight, once we have come through the other side into a new "normal"! This protection and provision makes sense of the line from the hymn, *Amazing Grace*: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come; 'tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

The writer moves on and exhorts his readers "to prepare their *minds* for action."²⁴ I believe he is right to highlight that the *mental* battle is just as important as the physical. We are aware of this in our isolation within our homes; positive mental wellbeing and self-control are crucial for sustaining us on this long journey. However, and in the context of dual citizenship, the writer is encouraging his readers to mentally focus on their identity in the *new* creation while suffering as we live within the present *old* creation. This may sound like a split-personality at first! But in a crisis, he advocates "Setting our *hope* completely on the *grace* that *will be* given us when Jesus the Messiah is revealed – at the end of time."²⁵ This is not escapist or wishful thinking because the resurrection of Jesus is the firm foundation for this

¹⁹ See 1 Pet 4:12–19.

²⁰ This perhaps reflects an Old Testament perspective: Ps 66:10; Mal 3:3.

²¹ i.e., God "sending" such trials in order to see if we would trip-up or be faithful. It is fair to say that it is possible the writer, building on texts like Wisdom 3:5-6, thought God *was* indeed sending the trial to test virtue. [Hear too the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into the time of trial."] However, later he suggests the trial is due to the devil (1 Pet 5:8-9)! We have to carefully consider the character of God (supremely revealed in Jesus) and not just quote a verse as a "proof-text" as we wisely formulate our (systematic) theology today. I would say that "darkness not liking - and so *opposing* - light" is sufficient reason for suffering "for the sake of the gospel" (2 Tim 1:8; 1 Pet 3:14; 4:16).

²² We also wonder, at times, why Christianity isn't *more* effective. Remember, Jesus did not choose to overwhelm his enemies with power. Persuasion, love, and faith are very different realities. And they leave open the pathway of rejection.

²³ 1 Pet 1:5. This would also mean providentially *providing* for us in our trial; i.e., practical care.

²⁴ 1 Pet 1:13.

²⁵ 1 Pet 1:13b. For this writer, it is fair to say salvation is *eschatological* in nature, to be realised on the Last Day and, for now, we live in hope.

hope. Put in a very human way, this is a feature of a “glass-half full, not half-empty” mentally. The writer is therefore encouraging us, as followers of Jesus, *not* to focus on what we have “lost” in terms of the *values* of this world, but on what we will eventually “gain” in Christ!²⁶ St. Paul expresses it like this: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*.”²⁷ (Notice that mental battle, again.) Practically, this is a call to be “holy.”²⁸ This sounds scary and daunting, yet it is straight from the Old Testament!²⁹ Just as a God of hope creates hopeful people, so a holy God is creating a holy people through his Spirit.³⁰ Note this holiness is seen in the context of *community*, and not simply in an individual’s life, and is demonstrated by sincere love *for one another*.³¹ And as we do that, we become authentic, living signs of God’s new world within the old world in which we live. The writer of 1 Peter had a bold vision of these troubled Christians, fearful in their social oppression, actually winning over the wider community through the transforming power of God’s love.³² That’s *why* we are radically called to be holy; that’s our new *vocation* as children of God!”³³

This demand for holiness is, however, *not* embodied in a series of rules. It begins with God taking the initiative and *graciously* reaching out to humankind and bringing us into relationship with himself through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.³⁴ In verse 18 the writer uses the word “*ransomed*” in describing God’s rescue. Today, when we hear that word, we think of a price being paid to release someone who was kidnapped. It is a good image, and in the 1st century the “ransom” was the price paid to a slave owner to buy or *liberate* a slave, not forgetting that some of the original readers were themselves slaves.³⁵ That price can be high in terms of silver and gold.³⁶ Our salvation, our freedom, was very costly for it was bought through “the precious blood of Jesus the Messiah,”³⁷ something we remember on Good Friday. In light of that, it would be *irrational* to be *ungrateful* and *disobedient* in the face of such a priceless gift. The writer of 1 Peter expresses it this paradoxical way in

²⁶ See 1 Pet 1:14-15.

²⁷ Rom 12:2a.

²⁸ 1 Pet 1:15-17.

²⁹ See Lev 11:44 – 45; 19:2; 20:7; these words were spoken to God’s people in the *wilderness*; i.e., ‘exile’ – see 1 Pet 1:14b. See also Matt 5:48.

³⁰ See also 1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10.

³¹ 1 Pet 1:22-23. See also Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1 John 3:11, 14; 4:11–12, 20–21.

³² Let me comment on 1 Pet 1:17, which says: “If you call on God as ‘father’ – the God, that is, who judges everyone impartially according to their work – conduct yourselves with holy reverence throughout the time in which you are in exile here.” When hearing the words “The God who judges impartially,” they can instantly bring on fear and anxiety! Let me suggest that this would have been heard as *good* news to the readers of this Letter. The *impartial* judge is one who will *not* be swayed by the social standing of people in the world. Given the readers were oppressed Christian slaves, women, etc. this is a reassurance that God sees *all* and does not have favorites based on status. Consequently, don’t consider God’s “judgement” as a motivation for “fearful” living! (God is your *father* and his “mercy is abundant,” v3). From the Old Testament, the scales of justice are hardly blind, nor neutral. God liberated Israel from Egypt and directs his people to share *his* regard for the oppressed and marginal. Even so, calling God “father” doesn’t mean we should expect special exemptions for our conduct!

³³ And why God has ‘set us apart’ for this purpose, see 1 Pet 1:2,5.

³⁴ See 1 Pet 1:18-21. The power of the resurrection is linked to an *imperishable* seed in 1 Pet 1:23, (4) and being “born again.”

³⁵ See also Exod 6:6; Isa 52:3.

³⁶ See 1 Pet 1:18.

³⁷ See 1 Pet 1:19-21. See also 1 Pet 1:2.

the next chapter: “As slaves of God, live as free people.”³⁸ All this is summarized as our calling to a new life and a new lifestyle.

In conclusion, imagine that you went to a flea market and found what appeared to be an old, dirty plant pot complete with a few dead leaves, and even having a crack running through one side of it. Even so, something about it drew your attention and so you bought it. Once you got it home you carefully cleaned it and you discovered that under all that dirt was a beautiful piece of pottery. You even repaired the crack and then placed it in a place of honor in your front window and gave a new use for which it was really suited. Now imagine that the original owner passed by, recognized it, and wanted it back! You would say “no,” it is no longer available because it was bought with a price. That image is analogous to *who* we are: we are beloved children of God our *father*, paid for by Jesus, restored, valued, and given a new life and new purpose. In light of the Easter story, let *us* therefore be encouraged to value *who* we are and to continue *living out* our new vocation, revealing signs of our owner’s new creation in the old world in which we live.³⁹ Amen.

³⁸ 1 Pet 2:16a. See also Eph 6:6; Col 3:24; 1 Cor 6:20a. [Note these Pauline allusions are evidence for a *later* date for 1 Peter.]

³⁹ Image adapted from one by N. T. Wright.