

Bible Byte

During the Easter Season, the lectionary readings place selections from 1 Peter alongside the gospel stories of resurrection. 1 Peter is a book that we spend little time in so, in addition to the worship materials each week which will draw from the gospel readings, each week I will try to put together some thoughts about the readings from 1 Peter.

1 Peter - who wrote it and to whom?

Firstly, 1 Peter is one of the “general” or “catholic” letters included in the New Testament. These letters (including Hebrews, James, 1,2 and 3 John, 2 Peter and Jude) are separated from the other letters of the New Testament for two reasons. First, they are not attributed to Paul; and second, they are “general” and “catholic” in the sense that they are not written to any particular church but written to groups of churches.

Most scholars agree that 1 Peter is most likely written by an early Christian leader sometime towards the end of the first century - in a time between the Roman Empire beginning to be suspicious of the early Christians and therefore making life difficult for them, and the time when the Empire banned their gatherings and practices altogether. While the letter claims to be attributed to Peter, the disciple and apostle of the gospel stories and the early church (as recorded in Acts), there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that this letter was written much later than Peter’s ministry. While for the most part, its authorship and time of writing do not seem to impact a great deal on its meaning, we will come back to its context as we explore some of its themes.

It is addressed (1:1) to “the exiles of the Dispersion” (NRSV) or “to God’s elect, strangers in the world” (NIV) to a group of churches in Asia Minor. These people were mainly non-Jews (Gentiles) who have come to faith in Jesus Christ and living in the broad expanse of the Roman Empire. The letter emphasises living faithfully through suffering, inviting Christ’s disciples to wrestle with how they live in their communities even when life is hard and the people around them do not share their convictions.

Perhaps as we explore this little letter together, we can find words that resonate with our current confinement, and encouragement to continue to be the people God calls us to be.

Easter 2 - 1 Peter 1:3-9 - *Praise to God*

After the traditional greeting (vv1-2), the writer offers praise to God framed as a response to what God has done through Jesus Christ. The next few verses then provide a kind of framework for the rest of the letter which we will explore over the coming weeks.

“He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (v.3)

- *What does “new birth” mean to you?*
- *What is “living hope” for you?*
- *What difference do these concepts make to your life today?*

“An inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading” (v.4)

This was important in a world where much was short-lived. Life expectancy was not what it is today, preserving anything was difficult. And yet, this inheritance offered through Jesus Christ is claimed as not subject to the perishing experienced by much of the world. Perhaps you could spend a moment thinking about what it means to you that the gifts offered to us through Jesus Christ cannot deteriorate or fade or rot.

“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials” (v.6).

There is no indication here of what these trials are, but later there is reference to the people being maligned by their neighbours because of their faith (2:12) and there is attention given to slaves who suffer unjustly.

Whatever our trials are, the invitation is to try to bring ourselves to a place of rejoicing in Christ, in spite of our trials.

- *How hard is it to rejoice in the midst of suffering, particularly if we are being treated unjustly?*

“The genuineness of your faith...may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed” (v.7).

The early Christians were convinced that Jesus’ return was imminent, that is, would happen in their lifetime. So the encouragement to endure suffering with grace and rejoicing was seen to be for the relative short-term and that when Jesus returned, the world would then understand what their faith is all about - there would be undeniable evidence in front of them.

- *How does this apply to our faith today and the way we relate to our neighbours?*
- *A deeper question - what does Jesus’ return mean to you?*

“Although you have not seen him, you love him and... believe in him” (v.8).

Here is an echo of Jesus’ words to Thomas in John 20:29. Take encouragement from the words as they speak to you.

“You are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (v.9)

The phrase “the salvation of your souls” is a phrase that Christians love to use. But what does it mean? Here it is described as “the outcome of faith”, or perhaps the whole point of faith. So what does it mean?

As in the days of the early Christians, those yet to hear the good news of Jesus struggle to understand what this phrase means, and I wonder whether too many Christians use the phrase without really understanding it for themselves.

In the days of the early Christians, the phrase also get mixed up with contemporary philosophies and other religious beliefs about other gods, ways to appease those gods and ways to achieve a peaceful and prosperous life (usually by appeasing the gods!).

- *So what does it mean for you to say that your soul has been saved? How would you describe the “outcome of your faith”?*
- *Now, without using “church jargon”, how would you answer those first two questions to someone who has yet to believe in Jesus?*
- *Why do our souls need saving anyway? Can you answer that without using words like “sin”? While it may be true that we are “all sinful and fall short of the glory of God”, is that the best way to start a conversation about Jesus? If not, where do you think is a good place to start?*