

1 Peter: Introduction

1 Peter is the first of two letters written by the apostle Peter to Christian communities scattered across the eastern part of the Roman empire.

The first verse refers to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia – provinces of the empire.

Quick quiz: can you find them on the map?

This is the same area in which Paul and other missionaries had been working, so Peter was probably not the one who planted all these churches, some of which also received letters from Paul.

1 Peter in our Bibles has five chapters, but there were no chapter or verse divisions in the original text. We will study it in six sections:

Chapter 1:1-16: 'To the Exiles' (7 July)

Chapter 1:17-2:10: 'The Time of your Exile' (14 July)

Chapter 2:11-3:7: 'Aliens and Exiles' (21 July)

BREAK

Chapter 3:8-22: 'Life in Exile' (4 August)

Chapter 4:1-19: 'The End of Exile' (11 August)

Chapter 5:1-14: 'Humility and Resistance' (18 August)

Please read each section ahead of the session in which we will study this section. If possible, read through the whole letter first (it won't take long). And please have a Bible open as we study 1 Peter together.

Each session will involve some input from me, introducing the section, followed by time for discussion – all together or in smaller groups, depending on numbers. Our aim will be not only to understand what we are reading but to ask what we can learn as followers of Jesus in a very different world.

Let's think about our life in Kent in 2020 and the world in which this letter from Peter was written.

For hundreds of years in Europe, Christians have lived in a culture deeply shaped by the Christian story, its values, beliefs, priorities and expectations. Historians call this culture 'Christendom'. Perhaps only a minority were committed Christians, but most people regarded themselves as Christians and felt at home in Christendom.

This has not been the experience of Christians throughout history and today in many other parts of the world, where as minority communities they do not feel fully at home and face ridicule, discrimination and sometimes persecution.

Christians in these places may find it easier than us to identify with Peter and his readers, who also lived in a society in which only a tiny minority were Christians and in which

persecution was a constant threat. They understand what Peter meant when he addressed his readers as ‘aliens’ and ‘exiles’ – not fully at home in their society.

What about Kent in 2020? Do we feel at home in our society?

Over the past hundred years, the church in Europe has been declining in numbers and in influence. The Christian community today is a minority in a society dominated by other stories, beliefs and priorities. Many people now describe our culture as ‘post-Christendom’:

- The gap between church and society has widened.
- What we believe and do may seem strange or even offensive to others.
- Our situation may now be closer to that of Peter and his readers.

So, maybe it is not surprising that the language of ‘exile’ makes sense to many Christians today in ways it has not done for centuries. Nor is it surprising that many look for inspiration and guidance to the ‘exile’ books of the Old Testament (Esther, Jeremiah, Lamentations, parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.). There are some similarities between the experience of the Israelite exiles in Babylon and that of Christians in ‘post-Christendom’.

We could have looked at these Old Testament books, but instead we will explore this New Testament letter that picks up the language of exile and offers hope and guidance to followers of Jesus living as minority communities.

What can we learn from 1 Peter about how we can live faithfully and bear witness courageously and sensitively in Kent in 2020?

Our world is not the same as Peter’s. Persecution may seem an unlikely prospect for Christians in western societies, but Peter’s letter might help us pray more effectively for brothers and sisters elsewhere for whom this is a daily reality.

And we might learn something about living as ‘exiles’ in today’s world.

As we study this letter together, watch out for some key themes:

- Hope
- Suffering
- Joy
- Holiness
- Hospitality
- Witness