

The Time of your Exile (1 Peter 1:17-2:10)

17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. 23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For, 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the word of the Lord endures forever.' And this is the word that was preached to you.

1 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like new-born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says:

'See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.'

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

'The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,'

8 and,

'A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1. What do you remember from our first study? Did anything in particular strike you, challenge you or encourage you? Do you remember the key word?

2. If the key word in the first section of the letter is 'hope', the key word in the second section is 'holy'. Verse 16 is the link: hopeful people are to be holy people.

3. What does 'holy' mean? It can seem a scary or threatening word. Some places are regarded as holy, especially ancient sites (Jerusalem, Hagia Sophia, 'thin places'). Some people are described as holy and are given special saintly status. And God, of course, is often called holy, as in this verse.

4. Holiness really has two meanings – and both are important in this letter. To be holy is to be different, separate, distinctive; and to be holy is also to behave faithfully and consistently.

5. Remember, Peter is writing to exiles, resident aliens, those who do not fully belong to the Empire, 'in the world but not of the world', urging them to live distinctive lives. Here he calls them 'foreigners' (1v17). In the rest of the letter he will spell out what it means to be distinctive in the way they live as a Christian community.

6. As we continue to study this letter, let's keep asking ourselves this question: what does it mean for us today to live distinctively? Some of the issues Peter addresses may still be relevant today, but we don't need to limit ourselves to these. How do we, as members of a minority Christian community in 2020, live distinctive, holy lives?

7. This section of Peter's letter is rich in pictures and Old Testament references, which tumble over each other. He writes about seeds and sowing, removing soiled clothing, infants and milk, stones and buildings, priests and sacrifices. There are references to Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah and Hosea, although Peter seems to be working from memory rather than quoting the texts exactly.

8. Peter continues to reassure these small, struggling communities that, whoever else is against them, God is for them:

(a) He has redeemed them (1v18) – rescuing them from captivity at great cost to God.

(b) He raised Jesus from the dead (1v21), so they have nothing to fear, whatever their enemies might do to them.

(c) He has chosen them and they are precious to him (2v4), just as the Father chose Jesus (1v20) as the chosen and precious cornerstone (2v6), whose precious blood (1v19) secured their freedom. Check how often the words 'chosen' and 'precious' appear in this passage!

9. So then, Peter writes, if they have received all this from God already and have so much more to look forward to, how should they live? If they are 'the people of God' (2v10), what does it mean to live as God's people?

10. Peter reminds them of the changes that have taken place in their lives:

(a) They have been redeemed from an empty way of life (1v18).

(b) They have had a revelation of Jesus (1v20).

(c) They have been born anew (1v23).

(d) They have received the word of the Lord (1v25).

(e) They have tasted God's goodness (2v3).

(f) They have been called out of darkness (2v9).

(g) They have received God's mercy (2v10).

11. So then, how should they – and we – live?

12. Later in the letter, Peter will write about loving their neighbours and enemies, but he first writes about loving members of their own community. As exiles, members of a minority community, they will need each other's support.

13. Peter lists five practices that damage any community and must be put away (2v1):

- (a) Malice – bad attitudes to each other, wishing each other harm.
- (b) Deceit – not speaking truthfully to each other.
- (c) Hypocrisy – pretending to be what we are not, wearing a mask.
- (d) Envy – wanting what others have instead of being content and grateful.
- (e) Slander – speaking unkindly and unfairly about each other.

14. *Let's pause for a moment and examine our consciences. Do any of these practices need addressing in our lives, in our community?* They are destructive and need to be rooted out.

15. Peter knows his readers well enough to be able to write to them (1v22) that they already 'have sincere love for each other', but he still wants them to examine their behaviour so that they 'love one another deeply, from the heart.' Many churches describe themselves as 'loving' or 'welcoming', but Peter's challenge is to go deeper and further.

16. Being a community that is growing in love and holiness is crucial if they are not only to survive as exiles but also to be a witnessing community. Peter reminds them that, just as God chose Israel not just for its own sake but to be a light to the nations, so God has chosen them to 'declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (2v10). There will be much more about mission in the rest of the letter.

17. One more thing. Peter never uses the word 'church' in this letter. He refers to the exiles as 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (2v10) and writes that they are being built into a 'spiritual house' (2v5).

18. Actually, that 'house' word is 'oikos', from which we get words like economy and ecology. Peter encourages these scattered followers of Jesus to understand themselves as God's household – an extended family, not an institution or people we encounter at meetings. That's challenging but maybe during lockdown we have discovered that the Christian community is not as dependent on buildings or meetings as we thought.

19. *You might want to reflect on what you've read already or pick up other things from this passage but here are three questions to ponder:*

- (a) What might 'living distinctively' look like in Whitstable in 2020?
- (b) If our church is already a loving community, how can we go deeper and further?
- (c) What have we learned in lockdown that might suggest new ways of being church?