

Transcript of Talk on 1Peter by Stuart Murray Williams

Over the past couple of months while we've been unable to meet together, several of us have been exploring together the first letter of Peter. Peter was writing to scattered communities Christians in the area of the world that was then known as Asia Minor but we now know as Turkey. Some of us have met online others have worked through the teaching notes and discussion questions. And Paul has asked me to draw together what we've been learning for one final session as a reminder for those who've been studying the letter. And also as an opportunity for others to consider some of the highlights.

KEY WORDS IN 1 PETER

So, let me start by introducing some of the key words that unlock the message of this letter –

First of all, '**exiles**': several times Peter addresses his readers as exiles, aliens, strangers and sojourners. Those who are not fully at home in their surroundings; who are committed to a different kingdom, a different way of life and different priorities. They are members of a minority community.

Secondly, '**suffering**' is a major theme in the letter as these differences between the minority Christian community and the surrounding culture have provoked persecution and mistreatment in their families, in their neighbourhoods and especially from the civic authorities. Peter gives them guidance as to how to respond and several times points to the example of Jesus and how he responded to suffering.

Thirdly, '**hope**' for the letter is full of reassurance and hope. Their suffering, Peter says, will soon give way to glory, salvation and joy. Peter clearly expects Jesus to return very soon. He was wrong about that but quite right to point out that in the light of eternity any present troubles, however distressing, would soon be over.

Fourthly, the theme of '**holiness**'. This hope that they have and their status as a non-conforming minority community has ethical consequences. They are to live holy lives; bearing witness by the way they live to the hope they have and the values of God's Kingdom. Peter spells out the kinds of behaviour that are inappropriate now that they've chosen to follow Jesus and the qualities that will sustain them as a Christian community.

And '**declaring**': they are, Peter says, to declare the praises of God and to proclaim the good news, even if this increases the opposition. However, they are to do this graciously and wisely; waiting for the opportunities, answering questions that are provoked by their way of life.

APPLYING AND INTERPRETING 1PETER

I hope that we can immediately relate to some of what Peter wrote. Christians in Britain today are also in many ways an exile community; a small minority in a culture with very different values. Suffering of various kinds is the lot of all human beings, including Christians. In all eras living hopefully in the light of God's coming kingdom sustains us in many different circumstances. The call to holiness and non-conformity is for all followers of Jesus in all times and all places and we are always to look for opportunities to declare the good news and the praises of God.

So there is much that we can take directly out of Peter's letter and apply to our lives. But there are also some important differences between our context and that of the readers of this letter, so we need to be careful as we interpret it and apply it to our lives. Although we are now a minority community, for hundreds of years in Europe Christians have been in the majority and our culture has been significantly shaped by the Christian story. This was not true for Peter's readers. Perhaps they

could see more clearly than we can how different the Christian community needed to be in its lifestyle and practices. Maybe we need to do a bit more work on that?

Secondly, we are not suffering persecution or likely to face this anytime soon. The most we're likely to encounter is mockery, teasing discrimination and restrictions. These may be unpleasant, but let's keep a sense of perspective. These things are not persecution and let's be very conscious of our brothers and sisters in many parts of the world who are being persecuted. Peter's letter should help us to do that.

And thirdly, many of Peter's readers were young Christians from pagan backgrounds and they'd quite recently be indulging in the kinds of behaviour that have no place in the Christian community. Peter mentions murder, orgies, drunkenness and so on. Most of us are Christians of long-standing. Many of us have been raised in Christian homes. Orgies and drunkenness are not really in our background, but Peter also mentions some more *respectable* sins like meddling and grumbling, envy and slander. And these things are highly destructive in communities. Maybe those things, in particular, we need to ponder.

So we need to be careful as we interpret 1 Peter. We're not in quite the same position as the communities to which he wrote. There are things we can learn from the letter, but we also need to make some translations into our culture. Something else we noticed as we read the letter together and thought about the context, is that Peter is clearly being quite careful in the way that he phrases things. Perhaps in case his letter fell into the wrong hands and made trouble for those he hoped would read it one day. He uses code language, for example, in the fifth chapter referring to Rome, where he was writing from, as 'Babylon'. And we sometimes need to read between the lines in order to pick up his real meaning. What may seem to be subservient and traditional could actually be quite subversive.

ISSUES IN ROMAN CULTURE

Three major issues in Roman culture that Peter deals with in this letter, and that we thought quite a bit about during this series, were: **hierarchy**, **slavery** and **patriarchy**. The Roman empire was a hierarchical society and at the top of it were wealthy and powerful men. Women were second-class citizens and under the thumb of their husbands. Slaves were regarded as property rather than human beings. This was an oppressive society with values that were utterly alien to the values of God's kingdom. Tiny scattered Christian communities, like those to which Peter was writing, couldn't change culture in the short term. They simply had to deal with hierarchy, slavery and patriarchy as givens in their culture. But they could quietly and courageously subvert it, so that in time these social structures might be dismantled. And so Peter has advice for them: he tells them, if you're a slave, submit to your master but for the Lord's sake not your master's. Live as a free man or free woman inside.

When we looked at this passage, I used the example of a child told to sit on the naughty step who tells her mother: "I may be sitting down on the outside but on the inside I'm standing up". Slaves and masters sat down to eat together in the Christian community and that was very subversive. Also Peter says, if you're a woman married to a pagan husband, as many would have been, submit to his authority but live in such a way that you provoke him to ask why you live as you do and then share your hope with him. In this way, husbands whose religious views were meant to be shared by the whole household, might be converted and that too is highly subversive: the woman's religion becoming the man's! In a culture where the emperor demanded to be worshipped as a god, Peter says you are simply to honour him, just as you should honour everybody. In other words emperors deserve no special treatment. So it is possible to read Peter's letter and to imagine that he supports hierarchy, patriarchy and even slavery because he doesn't condemn them and he doesn't suggest that they can be resisted directly. Sadly, many Christians through the centuries have read Peter's letter in this way

and have continued to endorse these structures and attitudes but read between the lines and you find a much more subversive, exciting and liberating message.

LIFE IN THE 'OIKOS'

Another key word in Peter's letter is the Greek word '**oikos**', which means '**household**' and from it we get words like economy and ecology. Economy is about managing the affairs of the national or global household and ecology is about protecting and managing the resources of the planet. Peter never uses the word church in this letter. Instead he writes about God's 'oikos', God's household, which is a family image, with Christ as the head, rather than an institution.

And he asks his readers to think about how they are to behave in God's household. We've already thought about the call to **holiness**; to behaviour that doesn't damage the household.

Peter also emphasizes the importance of genuine **love** and **mutual support**. These exile communities are under pressure and they will need each other's support. The Christian household also needs its members to play their part and to use their gifts may be gifts of speaking or of practical service. It's clear from what Peter writes that there is no room for passengers or spectators in this household. So perhaps we should ask ourselves, and ask those who know us well, what gifts we have that we can use in our household in our Christian community.

Towards the end of the letter he talks to those who have leadership responsibility in the household and says that they are to understand their role as that of shepherding. Jesus, he reminds them, is the Chief Shepherd but the leaders of the oikos are the under-shepherds, commissioned to care for the household. The shepherding image is used a lot in both Testaments: bad shepherds are called out; good shepherds are commended. So, leadership in the oikos is not about status or public performance or exercising power but leading and teaching by example; caring for the household and equipping all of its members for mission and the ministry.

WHAT ELSE? I'm not going to try and cover everything that we looked at in the six Bible studies in this short talk. The recordings and the notes are on the website – thanks very much to Tony for that – and you can look at them when you want. But maybe just a couple of other things as we draw to a close:

THE REAL ENEMY

First of all, in the last chapter the devil appears. He is a roaring lion looking for prey and Christian communities are instructed to be alert to his presence and his intentions and to resist him firmly. Now in the past few months we've become very familiar with the words: "Be alert"! It's been on the news all the time and on posters around our neighbourhoods. And Peter uses this phrase "Be alert" on a number of occasions. We are in a battle, he says. We need to be on guard so that we're not deceived or consumed. This spiritual force is the real enemy; not abusive husbands, not oppressive slave owners, not unfriendly neighbours or persecuting authorities. Peter tells his readers and us to love those supposed enemies; to return good for evil, to pray for them and to bless them. But we are to resist the devil. Sadly, Christians through the centuries, when the church has been powerful and influential, have become confused and have regarded other human beings as enemies. Behaving cruelly and violently towards them, supposedly in the name of Christ and failing to recognize the real enemy. But as we read the New Testament and, especially in places like Ephesians chapter 6, we discover that our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

We are called to be a community of grace and of peace. That was how Peter started the letter: blessing these readers with grace and peace. But they are to fight vigorously against the real enemy.

JUDGEMENT AND HOPE

And Peter also teaches his readers about judgment: they need not retaliate against those who mistreat them – those who appear to be their enemies – but leave them in God's hands. Now the fate of their persecutors isn't spelled out, but it is a scary prospect. However, in the Bible and here in 1Peter, judgment is not primarily about punishment but about God putting things right. And it's welcomed as an expression of God's justice and love. Peter himself, in Acts chapter 3, describes this as the renewal of all things. God's judgment is the doorway to the new heavens and the new earth. That is our ultimate hope. Peter writes that judgment begins with the oikos, the household of God. As Paul writes elsewhere, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give account of our earthly lives. Our salvation doesn't depend upon our good works but on Christ's saving actions on our behalf. But we are to lay up treasure in heaven; to build with gold silver and precious stones; to expect our works to be tested and hopefully to receive the welcome: "Well done good and faithful servant". This is the hope that will sustain these exile communities and the people of God in all generations.

So I hope you've enjoyed our journey through Peter's letter over the past few weeks and that this summary has been helpful. Peter ends his letter by sending his greetings and by urging his readers to greet each other with a loving kiss. I don't think we'll be able to do this anytime soon in our socially distanced world but maybe we can find other ways of committing ourselves to the oikos of God and to its ongoing mission. Thank you.