

1 PETER 5.6-11: GOD WANTS US TO BE PEOPLE OF FAITH

[Chelmsford 25 November 2012]

A vicar ran out of petrol, but the filling station was only 100 yards away. He hadn't an empty can, so he used the baby's potty that was in his car, to put the petrol in. As he was pouring it into his tank, one of his parishioners passed by. '*Heavens, Vicar*', he said, '*you've more faith than I have*'

This morning I want to preach about faith.

Not the Alice-in-Wonderland kind of faith that dreams up six impossible things before breakfast - but rather the kind of faith that keeps us going when life is tough and the outlook is bleak.

- "*Faith makes the uplook good, the outlook bright, the inlook favourable, and the future glorious*" (Raymond Edman)
- "*Faith is the bird that sings while dawn is still dark*" (Rabindranath Tagore).

My text is found right at the end of 1 Peter.

As regulars will know, throughout this autumn we have been studying Peter's First Letter.

This morning I want us to look at how Peter brings his letter to a conclusion.

He does so by giving a threefold farewell message which may be summed up in the words "*Have faith in God*".

1. TRUST GOD

In the first instance Peter encourages his readers to exercise their faith by trusting God, believing that God is not just working out generally his purposes in human history, but more specifically he is working out his purposes in our own individual lives.

Listen to Peter "**Humble yourselves then under God's mighty hand, so that he will lift you up in his good time. Leave all your worries with him, because he cares for you**" (4.6-7)

The context here is all-important.

The churches to which Peter was writing were undergoing persecution.

Earlier in his letter (4.12-13), for instance, Peter had said: "**My dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful test you are suffering, as though something unusual were happening to you. Rather be glad that you are sharing Christ's sufferings....**"

Life was far from easy for those first century believers.

They knew what it was like to suffer for their faith. Time and again they found themselves unjustly accused, simply because they were Christians.

In such a context some may well have begun to feel resentful toward God.

"*God, it's not fair, it's not right*". Some may have even begun to question their faith: "*Could God be God?*" if this was their lot.

BUT Peter says, keep believing, keep trusting God.

He writes: **Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand.** I.e. "*Don't be resentful of your lot in life. Bow to God's wisdom. Trust God, whatever.... God knows best*"

The phrase "**God's mighty hand**" is a common expression in the Old Testament. It is frequently used in connection with God freeing his people from slavery by bringing them out of Egypt: e.g.

- Ex 13.9: "**The Lord brought you out of Egypt by his great power** [lit: with his mighty hand]"
 - Deut 9.26: "**You brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand**" [NRSV]
- When God's hand is upon his people it is always for their good - it is always there to bless them. At the time it may not be obvious - everything may seem chaotic - but with hindsight it becomes clear that God was at work.

So to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand is to trust him to work things out for our good, even although at the time everything may seem to be going wrong in our lives. Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who was imprisoned by the Nazis in Ravensbruck concentration camp, once said: "*When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer*".

"Humble yourselves... so that he may lift you in his good time".

Or as Peterson, The Message says in his paraphrase of this verse: "***God's strong hand is on you; he'll promote you at the right time***".

My mind goes to the story of Joseph in the Old Testament: Joseph who because of his father's favouritism was resented by his brothers and sold into slavery by them. What a dreadful experience it must have been for him - at the time he must have felt like ranting and raging against God. Everything seemed to be going against him. But when he came to look back upon his life, he realised that in spite of everything God's good hand had been upon him. As he said to his brothers "**Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good**" [Gen 50.20 NRSV]. God had the last word. God in his providence ensured that Joseph not only was personally blessed, but that he in turn became a blessing to his people.

Unlike some of Peter's readers, none of us have ever been persecuted for our faith – and none of us have ever experienced the kind of hardship that Joseph knew: but

- some of us here have known what it is like to be unfairly treated
- some of us here have known what it is like for the bottom to fall out of our world

At such a time we may well have wondered where God is.

Indeed, perhaps even this morning there is somebody here questioning where God can be in all the mess.

If that is you, listen to Peter, who calls us to "**humble ourselves under God's mighty hand**" - to trust God, whatever.

In practical terms, this means, says Peter, that we "**leave all [y]our worries with him, because he cares for you**".

Most English versions of this verse are misleading at this point.

For in our English versions we normally have two main verbs: "***Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand. FULL-STOP. Leave all your worries with him***".

But in fact Peter writes: "*Humble yourselves by leaving all your worries with him*".

What's more, we have here a present participle. Literally Peter writes: "*Humble yourselves by KEEPING on casting all your anxiety on him*" - present tense.

These words are reminiscent of the Psalmist: "**Leave all your troubles with the Lord and he will defend [NRSV sustain] you**" (Ps 55.22).

They are reminiscent too of what the Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "**Do not be worried about the food and drink you need to in order to stay alive or about clothes for your body... Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. Instead be concerned above everything else with the kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will prove you with all these other things**" (Matt 6.25-34).

George Mueller, the 19th century philanthropist, who ran a children's home in Bristol, put it this way: "*The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety*"

The fact is that God does care for us.

Indeed, if ever we want proof of this we only have to look to the Cross of Jesus.

"If God is for us, who can be against us? Certainly not God, who did not even keep back his own Son.... Will he not also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8.31,32).

Sometimes it is desperately hard to believe that God does care. But look to the Cross.

As one theologian put it: "*Golgotha is both the demonstration and the measure of God's caring*" (Cranfield).

God does care for us.

So let us exercise our faith by trusting him, however tough life may seem.

2. BEWARE OF THE DEVIL

But along with trusting God, we are to beware of the devil. Peter continues in vv8-9: "**Be alert, be on the watch. Your enemy, the Devil, roams round like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Be firm in your faith and resist him**"

Or in the words of Peterson's paraphrase: "**Keep a cool head. Stay alert. The Devil is poised to pounce, & would like nothing better than to catch you napping. Keep your guard up**" (The Message).

I wonder, when Peter wrote these words, was he drawing upon his own experience?

Did his mind here go back to the garden of Gethsemane, where he had said to Jesus in front of all the other disciples that "**I will never leave you, even though all the rest do!**" (Mk 14.29), but then within a matter of a few hours he so miserably failed his Lord?

Indeed, not only did he fail his Lord by betraying him, but he also failed him by failing to keep awake in his hour of need. As Jesus said with some sadness: "**Simon, are you asleep? Weren't you able to stay awake for even one hour? Keep watch, and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak**" (Mk 14 37-38)

From bitter experience Peter knew the need to keep alert.

The fact is that Satan is on the war path - he will do his darndest to discourage us from going the way of Christ

"Your enemy" (literally your Satan), the devil, is "**roams around like a roaring lion**"

Our image today of a "**roaring lion**" may come from visits to the zoo, or from the zoom lens of a television programme.

But some who received Peter's letter would have had a stronger sense of horror.

They had seen human blood dripping from the mouths of lions in the gory spectacles of a

Roman amphitheatre.

Others who received Peter's letter might have thought back to the Psalms, where the psalmist often pictured his foes as lions lying in ambush and waiting to pounce. E.g. Ps 22.13: **"they open their mouths like lions, roaring and tearing at me"**

Whatever the background, Peter views Satan as a cunning and evil being who has the ability and propensity to attack Christians.

I believe that we need to take Peter's warning seriously.

A number of years ago CS Lewis, the Oxbridge don who wrote the Narnia stories, once said: *"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight"*

I don't believe that Peter would have us deify the Evil One and see the devil under every bed - but neither would Peter have us ignore the reality of the wiles of the Evil One: **"Your enemy, the Devil, roams round like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour"**.

The Devil, says Peter, is like a prowling lion who attacks suddenly, viciously, and often when its unsuspecting victim is engaged in routine activities

What had Peter in mind?

Peter is here using a metaphor: he is not talking about physical death, but spiritual death - the Devil wants to do his best to cause people to give up the faith.

Remember, Peter is writing within a context of persecution - some of his readers were being tempted to renounce the faith (*apostasy*), to renounce their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Our circumstances today are different. Persecution is no longer a threat.

We may not be tempted to renounce our faith in Jesus- and yet are there not times when we are tempted to give up any meaningful faith in God?

Oh, we may still come to church - we may still say our prayers and go through all the motions of religion - but in our heart of hearts we no longer really believe the words of Paul that **God "by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than all we can ever ask for or even think of"** (Eph 3.21).

If we are not careful, we find ourselves down-sizing God - we make God far too small – with the result that we are not able to rise to whatever the next challenge might be. It has been rightly said *"Where God is at work... the Devil, the spirit of negation, is never far away"*

All the more reason for us therefore to take note of Peter when he writes: **Be alert, be on the watch... and resist him"**. James says something similar in his letter (Jas 4.7): **"Resist the devil and he will run away from you"**

But how are we to "resist" the Devil?

Peter makes it clear that we resist the Devil by being **"firm in your faith"**.

I.e. we resist the wiles of the devil by constantly renewing our faith and trust in God.

"So keep a firm grip on the faith", says Peterson in his paraphrase.

Don't allow the acids of cynicism and materialism to destroy your faith in the living God.

Don't allow the Devil to tempt you into believing that God is only a Primal Cause, a God who set the world into motion and then leaves it to its own devices.

The God of whom the Bible speaks is a God who is constantly active in the affairs of humankind.

In the words of the Apostle Paul: keep your minds ever open **"to see... how very great is his power at work in us who believe"** (Eph 1.19)

Remember, says Peter in v11, that **"all power is his for ever and ever"** (JB Philips).

Peterson: **"He gets the last word; yes he does"**. Continue to have faith in God!

3. BE CONFIDENT IN GOD

Finally, Peter turns from exhortation to promise: **"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who calls you to share his eternal glory in union with Christ, will himself perfect you and give you firmness, strength and a sure foundation. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen"** (vv10-11)

Notice how Peter describes God **"The God of all grace"**. What a wonderful description! Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican mystic associated with Pleshey wrote: *"Grace is God himself, his loving energy at work within his church and within our souls"*

"The God of grace will HIMSELF perfect you and give you firmness, strength and a sure foundation" us - the emphasis is on the personal pronoun.

In the words of one commentator: *"Ultimately our salvation is altogether his work. Our hope stands not in our own strength and loyalty to him, but in his strength and his faithfulness, not in our hold on him, but in his hold on us"* (Cranfield)

The reality is that when by faith we put our hand into the hand of God, he then holds onto us. He is there supporting us. Spurgeon's College, the college of which I was principal had as its motto the Latin tag **"Teneo et teneor"** - *"I hold - and I am held"*.

Peter says here that God will **"perfect"** us [NRSV **"restore"** you].

The same underlying Greek word is used in Mk 1.19 of fishermen mending nets.

It was also used of repairing damaged ships.

In other words, when Peter says that God will **"perfect"** us, he is in effect saying that God will repair the damage done to our lives.

From his own experience Peter knew that in Jesus there is always forgiveness, in Jesus there is always a new beginning. To quote Peter again, God is **"the God of all grace"**.

Peter goes on: **"He will give you firmness, strength and a firm foundation"**.

Essentially we have here three synonyms.

Peter emphasizes that if we play our part, God will play his part too.

God stands by those who continue to put their trust in him.

In the words of Peterson: **"It won't be long before this generous God who has great plans for us in Christ... will have you put together and on your feet for good"**

So, concludes Peter, **"To him be the power forever"**

Here we have a doxology – an ascription of praise to God.

It has been said: *"A doxology is a fitting conclusion to exhortation that is really Christian exhortation; because it is not just a matter of 'Try again' and 'Try harder', but is set in the context of the grace and faithfulness of God"* (Cranfield).

Yes, God is King - he is the one who has ultimate power! He is to be trusted.

[1 Peter 5.8-11]

To him be the glory!