

1 PETER 1.1-2: TO ENCOURAGE YOU

[Word Alive 7 November 2010]

Imagine you are a Christian, living in some remote part of the world, with no contact with the wider world – there are no phones, no e-mails, not even a postal service. To make matters worse, you are going through a rough time as a Christian – most people around you don't share your faith – indeed, they think you're a bit of a weirdo for believing in God. If the truth be told, you are beginning to doubt whether what you believe is true – is it worth continuing to make a stand for Jesus. And then, surprise, surprise, a fellow believer turns up with a letter from a leading Christian statesman, encouraging you to keep going – and reminding you of the certainty of the Christian hope.

That's the context in which the letter we call 1 Peter was written. It was a letter of encouragement. Listen to what Peter says right at the end of the letter: **“I want to encourage you and give my testimony that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it”** (1 Pet 5.12).

Tonight I am not going to preach a sermon – but rather want to focus on the opening two verses. Hopefully this will enable you to put into context the present Sunday evening sermon series on 1 Peter.

FROM PETER

“From Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ” (1.1), the letter begins. Three verses from the end we read: **“I write this brief letter with the help of Silas, who I regard as a faithful fellow Christian”** (5.12).

This letter claims to be written by Peter the fisherman, the brother of Andrew and a close friend of Jesus. Tradition is all in favour of this claim.

Moreover the contents of the letter seem to confirm the tradition. E.g.

- **“I am a witness to the sufferings of Christ”** (5.1) – Peter was certainly that.
- Indeed, it would appear from 2.23 that he had first-hand knowledge of the trial of Jesus: **“When he was insulted, he did not answer back with an insult”**.
- Furthermore, the content of the letter is very similar to the content of Peter's sermons recorded in the Book of Acts.

And yet there have been people who have questioned whether it was indeed Peter.

It has been said that the Greek is too good to have come from an Aramaic-speaking fisherman.

On the other hand, the author specifically states (5.12) that he used **Silas** as his secretary – maybe we can credit Silas with the good Greek.

Another objection to Peter being the author is that the references to persecution imply a time when it was an offence against the state to be a Christian, which only happened when Domitian was Emperor. But the reality is that it was tough to be a Christian in the Roman empire long before it became a state offence. Indeed, when the great fire of Rome broke out in AD 64, the Emperor Nero blamed the

Christians and 1000s of Christians in Rome were put to death. Some were rolled in pitch, then set alight while they were still alive, and then used as living torches to light Nero's garden.

The Roman historian Tacitus wrote: *"Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burned, to serve as a nightly illumination when daylight had expired"*. Although this extreme persecution only took place in Rome, the fact is that long before Domitian Christians were unpopular and suffered all kinds of injustice as a result.

Tradition has it that Peter was crucified upside down during Nero's persecution. If so, then this means that this letter must have been written before AD 64.

FROM PETER – AN APOSTLE OF JESUS CHRIST

Literally, the Greek word *'apostolos'* means one who is sent – as you will remember, after the resurrection Peter had been **commissioned** by the Lord Jesus to **"take care of his lambs"**, as also of his **"sheep"** (John 21). Without that encounter with the Lord Jesus by the lakeside it is doubtful whether Peter would ever have played a significant role in the church. For he had let the Lord Jesus down not just once, but three times. But the wonderful thing is that in the Christian life failure need not have the last word. Jesus gave Peter another chance.

'An apostle' – one who is 'sent'. Scholars comment that underlying this Greek word is a Jewish word, **shaliah**, which denotes an authorised agent or representative. Peter has authority as an apostle – but it was not an authority which rested in himself, but in the Lord who sent him. **"Whoever welcomes you"**, said Jesus to his disciples, **"welcomes me"** (Matt 10.40).

In the NT the word apostle has additional significance. An apostle is one who is **"a witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus"** (Acts 1.21). The resurrection is at the heart of Christian believing. The church is founded on the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. The apostles confirm the truth of resurrection. Peter and his fellow apostles had a very important role to play in the church.

FROM PETER – IN ROME

Certainly it is generally agreed that the letter was written from Rome. For in the penultimate verse of the letter the author writes: **"Your sister church in Babylon, also chosen by God, sends you greetings"**. The Babylon in question was not the once famous city on the Euphrates with its hanging gardens, but rather, as in the book of Revelation, Babylon stands for Rome.

TO GOD'S PEOPLE WHO LIVE AS REFUGEES

“To God’s chosen people who live as refugees scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1.1). In other words, it was written to Christians living in the country we now call Turkey. Galatia, Cappadocia, and Asia were all Roman provinces – Pontus & Bithynia formed another Roman province.

We have here what scholars term a *‘circular’* letter – we might call it a ‘round Robin’.

Unlike Paul’s letters to Corinth or to Rome, this was not addressed to one church – but to a whole group of churches. As a result, 1 Peter – together with his 2nd letter, as also the letters of James, John & Jude are sometimes called the *‘General Epistles’*. They were written to groups of Christians in general.

But did these Christians belong to a particular ethnic group?

Some have suggested the Peter was writing to a group of Jewish Christians who belonged to the so-called Diaspora, Jews who had scattered out from Palestine to all the countries of the known world. For literally Peter wrote: **“To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia & Bithynia”** (NRSV).

However, almost certainly most of Peter’s readers were Gentiles – Peter uses Jewish terms for the new Israel, the church.

- This explains how Peter could write in 1.14: **“Do not allow your lives to be shaped by those desires you had when you were still ignorant”**; the Jews knew the difference between right and wrong.
- Likewise, in 1.18 Peter must have had Gentiles in mind when he wrote: **“You know what was paid to set you free from the worthless manner of life handed down by your ancestors”**. Yes, there were probably some Jewish Christians reading this letter – but most will have been non-Jews, i.e. Gentiles.

Peter describes his readers as *“refugees”* (GNB) or *“exiles”* (NRSV), not in the sense that they were not living in their homeland of Palestine, but rather in the sense that they had yet to arrive at their true home, which is heaven.

As the writer to the Hebrews put it: **“There is no permanent city for us here on earth; we are looking for the city which is to come”** (Hebs 13.14).

Christians do not belong to this world. This thought was developed in a 2nd century letter, known as The Epistle to Diogenetus: *“For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary.... They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory. They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their sexual partners. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but [participate in the life of heaven]. They are obedient to the laws that have been made, and by their own lives they supersede the laws. They love everyone and are persecuted by all. They are not understood and they are condemned. They*

are put to death and made alive. They are impoverished and make many rich. They lack all things and abound in everything. They are dishonoured and they are exalted in their dishonours”.

As “**refugees**” or “**exiles**” Christians do not belong.

As the North American NT scholar, Joel Green puts it: “These are people whose commitments to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed dispositions and behaviours that place them on the margins of respectable society. Their allegiance to Christ had won for them animosity, scorn and vilification. Their lack of acculturation to prevailing social values marked them as misfits worthy of contempt”

To use the title of a book by Stanley Hauerwas, Christians are ‘*resident aliens*’ in this world. Christians do not belong to this world. To use the AV translation of 1 Peter 2.9: we are “**a peculiar people**”.

That was true then; that is still true today. In spite of the massive Christian legacy of the past, and in spite of the presence of an established church, Britain has now become a post-Christian society.

*“A post-Christian society, wrote Alan Gilbert, an Australian academic,” is not one from which Christianity has departed, but one in which it has become marginal. It is a society where to be irreligious is to be normal, where to think and act in secular terms is to be conventional, where neither status nor respectability depends upon the practice or profession of religious faith. Some members of such a society continue to find Christianity a profound, vital influence in their lives, but in so doing the place themselves outside the mainstream of social life and culture. Like the early Christians in a pre-Christian, classical world, they become a ‘peculiar people’, anomalous in their primary beliefs, assumptions, values and norms, distinctive in important aspects of outlook and behaviour. They become a sub-culture”.*¹ I find this letter of Peter is enormously relevant to Christians today

To quote 1 Peter 2.9: we are “**God’s own people**”. The AV translates “**God’s peculiar people**”, but the idea here is not peculiar in the sense of ‘funny-peculiar’,. But peculiar in the sense of being special. William Barclay writes: *“It frequently happens that the value of a thing lies in the fact that some one has possessed it. A very ordinary thing acquires a new value, if it has been possessed by some famous person. In any museum we will find quite ordinary things – clothes, a walking-stick, a pen, books, pieces of furniture – which are only of value because they were once possessed and used by some great person. It is the ownership which gives them worth. It is so with the Christian. The Christian may be a very ordinary person, but he acquires a new value and dignity and greatness because he belongs to God. The greatness of the Christian lies in the fact that he is God’s”* (236).

TO GOD’S PEOPLE - CHOSEN TO BE HOLY

“To God’s chosen people... You were chosen according to the purpose of God the Father” (1.1,2).

“God’s elect according to the foreknowledge of God” (AV)

¹ *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (Longman, London 1980):

In a way which defies understanding, God's love has gone ahead of us & drawn us to himself. CHS, the founder of the college of which I was once Principal, used to say that as we enter the Kingdom we go under an arch on which is written: **"God so loved the world that... whoever believes in him should not perish"**. But once we are inside we look back and see on the reverse side of the arch the words: **"You did not choose me, but I chose you"**.

Dianne Tidball in her popular Crossway commentary writes: "All who have responded to Christ have been chosen by God, elected by him, and while it might seem that the individual makes a personal decision to respond, it is God who has selected them. This is an encouragement and a comfort". God has chosen us. God values us – whatever others may think.

We have been not just been chosen, but we have been chosen for a purpose - we have been chosen to be holy. **"You were chosen according to the purpose of God the Father and were made a holy people by his Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be purified by his blood"**.

Holiness is the theme of Outrageous tonight. In the preaching plan the title of Martin's sermon is 'live holy lives', and I suggested that he base his teaching on four passages from 1 Peter:

- 1.14, 15: **"Be obedient to God, and do not allow your lives to be shaped by those desires you had when you were still ignorant. Instead be holy in all that you do, just as God who called you is holy"**
- 2.1: **"Rid yourselves, then, of all evil; no more lying or hypocrisy or jealousy or insulting language"**
- 3.9: **"Do not pay back evil with evil or cursing with cursing; instead, pay back with a blessing, because a blessing is what God promised to give you when he called you"**
- 4.2,3: **"From now on, then, you must live the rest of your earthly lives controlled by God's will and not by human desires. You have spent enough time in the past doing what the heathen like to do. Your lives were spent in indecency, lust, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and the disgusting worship of idols"**

God has called us to be holy – and difference is what holiness is all about.

We are different in the way we behave – and this difference is down to the fact that we belong to God. In the Book of Leviticus the priests are called to be **"holy"** (Lev 21.6) – the root of their holiness lay in the fact that they belonged to God. A little later the tithe is called holy: the tithe is holy because it **"belongs to God"**.

We have been chosen by God – we belong to him – it is because we belong to him, that we are different, and a sign of our difference is that we seek to live holy lives.

Needless to say, although Peter may describe the church as a **"holy nation"**, Christians are not perfect. I love the story of the minister who began his service with the greeting: *"Good morning, sinners"*. I would love to know how the congregation responded!

GRACE AND PEACE TO YOU

“May grace and peace be yours in full measure”

Like Paul, Peter combines a Greek and Hebrew form of greeting, but gives them deeper significance.

- Most Greeks greet one another with the word *chairein* – “Greetings”. – Peter uses a related word, *charis*, ‘**grace** be yours’. Grace is God’s undeserved loving favour which he shows to sinners, and which we see above all in Jesus. God, as Peter says in 1 Peter 5.10 is “**the God of all grace**”. See 2 Cor 8.9. ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free’
- Most Jews greet one another with the word ‘*Shalom*’ – **peace**; however, in the context of grace, this ancient greeting is given new meaning – for it is only God’s grace displayed in Jesus that makes peace a reality. The peace which Peter has in mind is not inner tranquillity – but the result of being put right with God. At the end of the letter Peter repeats this greeting as a blessing: “**May peace be with all of you who belong to Christ**”.

Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases the opening greeting: “*May everything good from God be yours!*”. Frankly, I feel that is somewhat anaemic. Let’s name those things which are good from God – grace and peace!