

As Christians, we continually celebrate – and find our ultimate hope in – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. St Peter's amazing letter helps us put that hope into practice. Written in challenging times, its life-giving wisdom is just as relevant today!

Day 1 – 1 Peter 1:1-2 'Elect and exiles'

Here's a question to begin: what do you hope for? No doubt that question would generate a range of answers: maybe for yourself or a loved-one to get well, a good holiday, a new or better job. Or maybe it's for something bigger: for more peace in the world, less exploitation, for our planet to survive.

Today we start a new series in the wonderful first letter written by St Peter. It's not a bad effort for a fisherman, with little formal education! That's the effect that Jesus has on someone; and it reminds me of that lovely encounter on the beach after the resurrection, when Jesus restores his friend and says: 'Feed my sheep.' Peter is certainly doing that in this amazing little book.

As we begin, our main theme is *hope*. Hope is a much misunderstood word in our society, often reduced to wishful thinking. But hope is not just wishful thinking: it is the confident expectation that one day things will be better than they are now. Whatever you hope for, hope is something inspirational, motivating – it gets us out of bed in the morning, puts unexpected peace and joy in our hearts during the day, and enables us to sleep at night.

So, knowing where to find hope is like knowing where to mine for gold. Think of all the gold rushes that sent hundreds of thousands of people migrating across continents, creating whole new communities and industries because they thought they could find gold there. We need a 'hope rush' at present – to know where we can find true hope, and to invest heavily in that.

And Peter is writing to these small, hard-pressed Christian communities precisely to offer that real hope. It's fascinating how he starts – to whom does he address the letter? Christians are described using two words, 2 'e's – elect and exiles. Both words are laden with meaning, they really define two great themes of the Old Testament: first, God's people are *chosen*, by God himself – we don't earn it, God lavishes his favour on us because he loves us. So, we are 'elect' i.e. chosen – but we are also 'exiles' (old translations use '*strangers*'). This was the fate promised to Israel if they abandoned God, but as the history of God's people wore on, it also became the way they saw themselves.

That image of being strangers, exiles in the world, became the dominant one for the early church, too, and by extension us as well – followers of Jesus are not like the rest of the world, we serve a different Master and learn to live out our faith in different, even hostile cultures. That's not an excuse to disengage from the world, but rather to seek to transform it. And it's clear from the rest of the letter that this is exactly what the Christians he's writing to are doing. They are distinctive, and one of Peter's messages is: don't give up. Keep going.

As we begin this series, take a few moments to reflect on this dual citizenship we have: chosen, but also strangers. Peter's greeting – 'grace and peace' – offers us inspiration in both dimensions: being chosen brings peace, being strangers requires grace. Praise be to God that we are given both, and in abundance! So, let's not give up, and let's live as citizens of both earth and heaven today. Amen.

Day 2 – 1 Peter 1:3-4 'Hope which can never perish'

Picking up where we left off yesterday, Peter continues the start to this motivational letter with the most important reason to keep going: (v3) 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' The resurrection is the ultimate gamechanger. A radical new power has broken into the world. Death is no longer the final end: Jesus has conquered it. Jesus is our living hope – living forever, glorified forever, the Word made flesh, who reigns over all. Nothing can defeat him now – his will be the victory.

Wow! That's not a bad place to start, is it? This is why I wrote this series after Easter, because this little letter roots everything in the good news of the resurrection. A resurrection which Peter himself had witnessed, of course. He speaks of what he knows, what he has seen.

So, what are the consequences of this unbreakable hope? The rest of the passage gives us three amazing outcomes, the first of which we'll look at today: this hope 'can never perish spoil or fade.' In fact, Peter calls it an inheritance. Usually inheritances are only released by someone else – uniquely this one is released by our *own* death! We inherit at that point, because this inheritance is 'kept in heaven for us.'

Heaven is real, and when you think about it, you'll spend a lot more time there than the few years you get on this earth. When life is good, that attitude seems a bit po-faced. But for people facing real crises, relentless challenges, even the steady decline of their own health – isn't it good news to know that this *isn't* all there is? That there is something way, way better than even the best of what we have now.

Today, give thanks that our living hope can never perish spoil or fade. Hallelujah!

Day 3 – 1 Peter 1:3-9 'Hope in dark times'

As we continue this amazing start to Peter's letter, the second thing we see is that this living hope carries us through the dark times. And it's clear from Peter's letter that his readers were experiencing plenty of those – he talks of them suffering 'grief in all kinds of trials.' (v6)

When life forces our heads down, we need to look up – up to our true and living hope. And this is one of those passages which must have inspired the famous 'Footprints in the sand story'. (If you don't immediately recognise that name, [google it!](#))

While writing this reflection, I was struck by a quote I came across in an article by Sheila Hancock about what VE Day (the end of the Second World War in Europe) was really like for much of the population: 'Yes, in 1945 we were relieved that the bombs and doodlebugs and rocket weapons had stopped, and we heard there was fun going on in the West End of London – but where I lived it was less jubilant. The war there felt far from over: we were still waiting anxiously for the return of the young lad next door from the rumoured horror of a prisoner of war camp, and many of my friends were trying to accept as fathers strange men they barely knew... I imagine the grownups were utterly exhausted and often grief-stricken.'

It's easy to look at the photos of central London on 8th May 1945 and assume everyone was just having a big party. But actually, many people were just exhausted; and there was still a long, hard road ahead. As Peter observes in our text, even gold perishes – we need something to hold onto which goes deeper. And here is where it might be useful to notice that Peter talks about our inheritance being one that not only doesn't perish, it doesn't spoil or fade either. Even our best experiences of life are usually diluted in some way. But our living hope doesn't spoil or fade.

80 years ago, the generation that survived the war had a much stronger grasp of these realities than their children or grandchildren. But maybe, their great-grandchildren are starting to appreciate those more again. Between 2018 and 2025, the number of 18-24s who connect with church regularly has increased from 4% to 16%, and to 21% among young men. That's a four- or five-fold increase in 7 years! A new generation is looking for living hope – and in Christ they find it.

Today, dark times seem as vivid as ever, especially on a global level. Let's pray for grace to hold on to hope, a hope that carries us through all things. And may that hope make itself known to ever more people across our troubled world. Amen.

Day 4 – 1 Peter 1:10-12 ‘Hope which saves’

As we continue our reflections on hope, we see a third outcome, our theme for today: this hope ‘concerns our salvation’. You see, we don’t just need hope for a better life – we need to be saved *from* something first. What Peter calls the sufferings and glories of the Messiah served a purpose. They dealt with our greatest enemies: sin, evil and death. Our hope is not self-help – it is restoration to our true selves, and only God can accomplish it in us. Perhaps that’s why so many young people are coming back to faith. We now have a society which apparently offers us everything, but very little of it actually *helps*. Much of it makes things worse. Our phones are full of precious metals... but people want something of greater worth than gold.

This quest is nothing new. As Peter attests, the Old Testament prophets ‘searched intently and with the greatest care’ – they were primarily seeking the Messiah, but of course we only need saving because things are not as they should be. What was true 2,500-3,000 years ago is just as true now, and even the angels long for the answer (v12)...

...In Jesus we find it! We find a hope which concerns our salvation, carries us through trials and can never perish spoil or fade. The long peace in Europe after the Second World War, almost unparalleled in human history, has come to an end. Times are anxious again. How we need Peter’s words today.

As we reflect on these things today, let’s close with the final responses used during the service at Westminster Abbey on 8th May 1945, and may be our prayer, too:

‘O give thanks to the Lord, for He is gracious: and His mercy endures forever. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name we give praise: for your loving mercy and your truth’s sake.’ Amen.

Day 5 – 1 Peter 1:13-17 ‘Be holy’

If I was to ask you which quality of God’s character is mentioned most often in the New Testament of the bible, what would you guess? It’s obvious, isn’t it? – it’s *agape* love. This is the word invented by Christians in the middle of the first century to describe love as Jesus showed it. It’s the word Paul uses in his great hymn to love: love is patient, love is kind, and so on.

And then we get to John’s great insight, the amazing distillation of over a thousand pages of divinely inspired scriptural revelation into this one simple phrase: *God is love*. It stands to reason, therefore, that the two great commands given to human beings – who are made in God’s image, the God who is in his very being love – are these: love God and love your neighbour. Even the Pharisees knew that.

But you’d be wrong. Yes, the word ‘agape’ is mentioned a lot – 259 times – in the New Testament. But there’s another word mentioned even more, 261 times – and that is the word ‘holy’.

Funny isn’t it, that we all know that God is ‘agape’, God is love, but even in the New Testament, there are more references to holiness. That’s primarily because the word used to name Christian believers in the New Testament, which most bible translations translate as ‘saints’, is in fact the word *hagioi* – which means holy ones. Not *agapoi* – loving ones – but holy ones. In other words, the single most compelling characteristic used to define Christians in the New Testament, i.e. the first and original generation of the church, is that we are *holy*.

And perhaps that’s something that we feel a bit unsure about. Unlike some Christian words such as hope, joy, peace, and of course love, which have almost universally positive connotations, the word holy or holiness gets more of a mixed press. In part that’s because we’ve all heard the sort of lazy theology which contrasts the ‘holy’ God of the Old Testament with the ‘loving’ God of the New. But it’s also because we carry images of the word ‘holy’ which aren’t flattering: we think uptight, sanctimonious, po-faced, a whole list of ‘oughts and can’ts’.

But the thing is, Jesus was the holiest person who ever lived – maybe the problem is with our definition? So, let’s go back to basics – what does the word holy mean? It means set apart – particularly set apart *for God*. That is why God’s very essence is defined as holy, because God is uniquely set apart from all of his creation – yes, creation is good, but only the Lord God is perfect.

As scripture unfolds, we learn that God’s *name* is holy, the *law* is holy – and also, God calls his *people* to be holy: ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ is how God describes them to Moses just before the giving of the Ten Commandments. That was 1,200 years before Jesus, but his great friend Peter is still working with the same frame of reference when he introduces our passage for today, quoting God’s words from the Old Testament law: ‘Be holy because I am holy.’ If the fundamental call of the Christian life is to become more like Jesus – then we grow not *just* in love, or joy or peace or hope, but in holiness too.

Today, take a few moments to reflect on your calling to be holy. Where is God setting you apart? How can you live out that calling today? And may the Lord grant us all grace to be holy, as he is holy. Amen.

Day 6 – 1 Peter 1:17-21 ‘Holy awe’

Today’s passage is a challenging one, because it commands us to fear (v17). And that bothers us, because surely we’re meant to be free from fear? So, let’s tackle this head-on, because it’s worth reminding ourselves that there are two types of fear: healthy and unhealthy. Unhealthy fear is absolutely something from which Jesus sets us free; and it is instructive that one of the first things he says to his friends after his resurrection is, ‘Do not be afraid.’ (e.g. Matthew 28:10)

However, just as in life generally we need certain types of fear to help us avoid things that can harm us, so in the spiritual life, we retain a similar healthy fear – it might be better translated as ‘awe’. Our awe of God means that we stay clear of things which damage us or destroy us.

Part of the reason for this is what it cost God to make us holy. As the passage continues: if the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our living hope, the death of Jesus is the foundation of our holiness: (v18) ‘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, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.’

Our salvation cost Jesus everything. The only truly and perfectly holy person who ever lived gave his life that we might be set free: not just from our sin, but from ways of life which have little value. Peter calls them ‘empty’, and such ways are not confined to ancient history; we all know the emptiness of much of modern living.

So, we are holy as a thankful response to what Jesus did for us. Awe is really the conscious presence of a holy God – may the Lord grant us that awe today, and may we live fruitfully, abundantly, as a result. Amen.

Day 7 – 1 Peter 1:22-25 ‘Loving holiness’

One further reflection on holiness, as we close chapter 1 of this remarkable letter – and this is where we bring love back into the equation. Let’s pick up Peter’s wisdom in v22: ‘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.’ Ultimately, holiness is made perfect in love. Too often we talk about holiness and love as things that are somehow are in conflict with each other. We have these parodies of ‘holy’ churches which are all rules and repression and fire and brimstone, and ‘loving’ churches which are all fluffy and anything goes and don’t really believe much at all.

Peter doesn’t see it like that – in fact, Jesus doesn’t. Holiness and love go together, hand-in-hand. Two sides of the same coin, they complete each other. Real holiness is soaked in love. We love because we are holy, we are holy because we love. Love which does not call people to live holy lives is not love at all – if God thinks something is wrong, we have to be brave and humble enough to trust God on that. Equally, holiness which is not saturated in humble, gracious, self-giving love is not true holiness, just a diet version of the real thing. Holy people love deeply, from the heart.

This is what the new, born-again life of a follower of Jesus looks like. We are born again to something eternal, imperishable, founded on the Word of God, which endures forever (v25). It’s interesting that Peter still refers to us in this passage, like he did earlier, as ‘foreigners’. This kind of lifestyle, this blend of love and holiness, is unusual. And, in a season when questions of nationality and identity dominate our news, let’s finish by reflecting that, according to Peter, the leader appointed by Jesus as the first shepherd of the body of Christ, *all* followers of Jesus are foreigners. That is our identity, and we should be proud of it, because it is the name given to us by the Lord, who brings people from all nations into his kingdom.

So as the global body of Christ, all of us strangers and foreigners here on earth, let’s recommit ourselves again today to loving holiness – to being holy because Jesus is holy, and to loving one another deeply, from the heart. And may the Lord grant us all grace to follow in the footsteps of Peter, and all the saints (the holy ones), who have gone before us, today, and always. Amen.

Day 8 – 1 Peter 1:23-2:3 'Milk of the word'

Those of you who are parents will probably remember those early months with a new-born baby – intense days, with great joy – and also great relief to have got through them! Babies are hard-wired to crave milk: they have to be, it's how they live and grow. In fact, often the first sign something is wrong is if a baby *doesn't* crave milk every few hours.

What's true for babies is true for the spiritual life, too. Generally, in matters of faith, we tend to think negatively about 'cravings'; but there is one craving which should absolutely indulge, as often as possible, as referenced by Peter today: (v2) 'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up.'

The translation doesn't quite help us as much as it should here, because the word for 'spiritual' is 'logikon', which actually means 'of the word'. We are to crave 'pure milk of the word.' In other words (pardon the pun), this text links directly to what Peter has been saying at the end of chapter 1 (and let's not forget that we've added the chapter headings and breaks, they're not there in the text of the letter). He's just reminded us that we have been born again by this word, this glorious revelation of salvation through faith in Jesus, the Word made flesh.

This word (*logos*) is eternal – he describes it as, not just 'living', but 'imperishable' (v23). It can't die, because it points us to the Author of Life, the Risen One who lives forever.

It is also enduring (v23) – unlike everything else in this world, it stands firm, forever (v25). It's not erratic or unpredictable, we can rely on it: daily, in all circumstances.

Finally, this word is exquisite – it tastes good! Faith involves all our senses, and I love this description of the early steps of faith: (v3) 'now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.' When we taste something we like, we want more of it. What's true with our food is true for our souls, too. If we want to keep growing, we need to keep feeding on this pure milk of the word.

This is what we aim to do every day with these Inspirations. But however you do it, the main thing is to keep doing it, to keep craving that daily diet of pure milk of the word; because through it we access life, resilience and joy – eternity, endurance and exquisite taste.

It's not always easy, there are times when our reading may seem hard work, or dry. If that's you, pray for grace to find that 'craving' return. And if you're energised by your scripture reading at present, pray that this might continue. God always speaks – what is he saying to you through his glorious Word today? May it bring each of you life, resilience and joy. Amen.

Day 9 – 1 Peter 2:4-8 'The living Stone'

Many years ago, I studied Renaissance art. One of my favourite artists is the great Michelangelo – and of all his many amazing works, perhaps my favourite sculptures of his are a set known as the 'Four Slaves' or 'Four Prisoners', which you can see in the Accademia museum in Florence ([you can see them here](#)). Michelangelo was once asked how he created his wonders, and he said that inside each block of stone there was a person: all he had to do was to chip away the excess and reveal what was already there. The four slaves show this idea most profoundly, revealing themselves from the block of marble. It's thought that Michelangelo deliberately left them unfinished, as if to show them in the midst of creation, trying to set themselves free. Living stones, in the process of formation.

This idea of 'living stones' is the central theme of today's passage: (vv4-5) 'As you come to Jesus the living Stone, rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house.'

Jesus is the ultimate 'living Stone' and we can imagine that this was a particularly special phrase for Peter – think about the name given to him by Jesus: Cephas, meaning 'Rock'. But Peter recognises his authority rests on one much greater – he points us to The Rock, *The* living Stone, Jesus himself.

This image of the divine rock has a long history in scripture. Back in Exodus, God meets Moses directly on that great slab of rock called Mount Sinai. A few chapters earlier, God provided for his people by bringing water from a rock (another living stone). King David was first to use the name for God directly, in his song of praise in 2 Samuel 22: 'the Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer.' It became a common phrase in Psalms – God as a rock. Secure, immovable – something immense, powerful, something which protects us, something we can trust. So, the idea of God as our Rock was born.

And when Isaiah prophesies about the greater one to come, he uses this idea again, which Peter himself quotes in v6: 'See I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone.' Christ is our cornerstone – the one on which everything rests. Most church buildings have a cornerstone – the single most important stone in the building, the one from which everything else is built. Not necessarily the biggest, but most important. 'Build your house on the rock,' Jesus says in his famous parable – and as Peter tells us, Jesus is that rock.

But he takes the image further, doesn't he? He adds a word. This rock is not just an inert block of marble. It is a *living* stone. Ultimately, Christ as the living Stone points us back to the resurrection: this great stone is alive! (And we can note the glorious irony that it was a huge, inert stone which rolled away to reveal the true and eternal living Stone.) Now we have come to him, and know him to be our Rock, our fortress and our deliverer.

Tomorrow, we'll develop this image, as Peter does, by thinking about what it means for us to be living stones, following the pattern of our Lord. Today, however, let's give thanks for our glorious, divine Rock – the one on which we stand, the one on which our dwelling is built, firm and secure. May the Lord be our Rock, our fortress and our deliverer today. Amen.

Day 10 – 1 Peter 2:4-8 (ii) 'Living stones'

Living stones. It's a striking image, isn't it? And, picking up where we left off yesterday, today we return to these same verses, to see how Peter develops this idea: it's not only Christ who is *the* living Stone: *we are to be like him, 'like living stones'*.

Now we see the image in more detail, don't we? Of what is Christ the cornerstone? God's people. Here the image sharpens (in v5) to reveal the temple, the place where God dwells among his people. Only now it's not the temple in Jerusalem anymore. *We* are the temple now. God dwells among us as his community – hence we are called 'the body of Christ' – and God dwells in us individually by his Spirit. So we, too, become living stones. What does that mean? Well, here's some ways that Peter draws this out in the rest of the passage:

'Chosen by God' (v4b). Never forget that before you chose God, God chose you. He thinks you're special, he didn't make anyone else like you. What you do matters to him. But even more, *who you are* matters to him. He needs you in his wall, his temple.

'Rejected by humans' (v4a) – this is the hard bit, isn't it? Not everyone will like us. We march to the beat of a different drum. We have to learn to find our security in Christ and not in others. Psychologists will tell you: 'You are what the most important person in your life thinks you are.' If that's God, then you can withstand anything.

'Offering spiritual sacrifices' (v5) – for followers of Jesus, this is a life dedicated to the Lord. And Peter reassures us that this kind of offering is 'acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' Why? Because 'the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' (v6) God delights in our dedication of ourselves to him.

Like Michelangelo's sculptures, none of us are the finished article; we are all works in progress, slowly but wonderfully emerging from the formless block of stone. But we are alive – living stones. Take a few moments today to reflect on what it means to be part of this great spiritual house being built by God. What is God chiselling in you? What will that mean for you? And may the Lord, the true living Cornerstone, fashion us all into living stones, building the Lord's House, for his glory, and his alone. Amen.

Day 11 – 1 Peter 2:9 ‘What’s in a name?’

Important people have many titles. Indeed, the more important, the more titles. King Charles, for example, is not only Sovereign of the UK and 14 other Commonwealth countries, he is also Defender of the Faith, Captain General of the Royal Artillery and even Chief Red Crow – a title bestowed upon him many years ago by the Blackfoot indigenous people of Canada.

You may not possess a title like this, or think of yourself as very important. God, though, thinks very differently, as today’s passage tells us. Bear in mind that Peter is writing to small, largely powerless fellowships of Christians ‘scattered’ (his word, 1:1) across the eastern Mediterranean.

Inconsequential, you might think – but not according to God, or Peter his apostle: ‘But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.’

Wow! There’s four titles *every* follower of Jesus carries – four things not even the king can match. Let’s look at each briefly in turn:

A chosen people: as we noted in our very first reflection, being chosen is a key theme of this lovely letter. Before we ever chose God, God chose us. Our inheritance is no accident.

A royal priesthood: I once had a friend called Bob, who worked as an evangelist. When people asked him if he was a priest, he said, ‘No, I’m a royal priest!’ But that’s not just for ‘professional Christians’ – Peter tells us that all followers of Jesus are royal priests. What does a priest do? They’re a go-between: representing God to people and people to God. That is our calling – not just within our church communities, but also with those currently outside them. We represent them to God i.e. we pray for them we ask God to be in their lives. And we represent God to them: we love them, we help them, and we share our faith with them.

A holy nation: the second half of chapter 1 focused on this, didn’t it? We are holy i.e. set apart, distinctive. Set apart *from* evil, set apart *for* just and right living, above all set apart *in* love.

God’s special possession: all of this is not just God being nice, even when he doesn’t feel like it. God treasures us: he delights in saving us, in making us his holy people. God doesn’t just love you – he *likes* you. You are his special possession.

If can really grasp these extraordinary truths, then the outcome is natural: ‘...that you may declare the praises of him...’ Who wouldn’t want to praise a God who showers these titles upon us?

As we reflect today, take a few moments to dwell with these titles. Which speaks most to you? How will you live as one who bears this honour? And as these reflections fill our heart, may we, too, declare the Lord’s praises, through our lips and our lives – today, this week, always. Amen.

Day 12 – 1 Peter 2:9-10 ‘His wonderful light’

As I write this at my desk in the early evening, it's a lovely sunny end to the day. Light streams through the branches of the trees, I am enjoying watching the birds on my feeder (trying not to be too distracted!), and everywhere seems green and bursting with life. Even a few weeks ago, I couldn't have written any of those things. It would have been dark, a biting wind was ripping through the bare branches of the trees, and my bird feeder was quiet and unattended: the birds were no doubt already roosting.

It's amazing the difference a few weeks makes, as we journey again from darkness to light. This is also the central image of these few verses, and it's a famous one throughout scripture, starting right at the beginning of time: 'Let there be light!' This particular theme of our spiritual journey being one of moving from darkness to light was inspired, of course, by Jesus himself, who told his night-time visitor, Nicodemus: 'light has come into the world... whoever lives by the truth comes into the light' (John 3:19,21).

To come to Christ is to be called out of darkness into his wonderful light. Suddenly we can see life clearly, more vibrantly – clear enough, certainly, to declare God's praises.

These are not the only 'before and after' images in this text. To move from darkness to light is a journey from disconnection to connection: (v10) 'once you were not a people, now you are the people of God'; it's also a journey towards mercy: 'once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.'

Perhaps it's easy on a warm spring evening to understand what it means to walk in Jesus' marvellous light. However, this is an image for every day, in every season – arguably it's even more important to hold onto on those dark winter nights. The light we have is not dependent on the sun, but the Son; his light is constant, eternal. The great band The Smiths once sang, 'there is a light that never goes out' – and I must admit that I'm not sure if they know where that light is. But we do! As we rejoice in the light of Christ today, may it cause us to declare his praises once again; and having received mercy, may we all have grace to pass that mercy on. We are the people of the light.

Day 13 – 1 Peter 2:11-12 ‘Guarding our souls’

To live as a follower of Jesus, we have to hold certain things in tension. We are saved now... and also await the fullness of it i.e. not yet. We can approach God only by grace, not by being good... but this grace inevitably leads to good works. We are also at peace, and yet live in the midst of conflict.

To use words like conflict or battle is something which can be challenging in our current season. There is more actual war around the world than at any time since 1945. What you might call the ‘martial imagery’ of the New Testament is something many Christians feel a bit uncomfortable with. Yet, we can’t duck the issue either. The fact is that Jesus is very clear about the reality of the conflict that exists between the kingdom of God and the kingdom(s) of the world. Although Peter begins his letter by declaring peace over all of his readers (1:2 and 5:14), much of his letter concerns itself with the practical nature of this conflict – within our souls, within communities, and potentially also with human authority. We may be people of peace, but the spiritual battle is real.

The second half of this chapter of Peter’s letter addresses this head-on. He begins by addressing probably the most important one of all for every Christian: the battle *within* us: (v11) ‘I urge you... to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.’ If this language sounds overly dramatic, it’s worth remembering that the ancient world experienced just as much war and conflict, so it’s a powerful reminder of just how important this ‘battle’ is. Thoughts and feelings are not morally neutral – they have the power to bless or destroy. If we indulge the wrong attitudes and desires, they damage us, they lead us away from Jesus.

Crucially they also hinder our capacity to live the kind of life God longs for us to have. Jesus consistently taught that to live right (righteousness) is all about the heart. If we cultivate the right heart, we will naturally *do* the right things. Conversely, if our hearts are full of bad thoughts and desires, hard as we might try, we won’t live a Jesus-shaped life. That was the fundamental mistake of the Pharisees. You can set up all the rules you want to try and do the right things, but if your heart is corrupted, it doesn’t work.

Peter automatically thinks along the same lines. He moves straight from advice about our desires into the practical outcome: (v12) ‘Live such good lives among the pagans...’ The one follows the other. If we guard our souls, we will be much more likely to live good lives. We may not avoid criticism for doing so (more on that in the next couple of days), but the evidence will be there for all to see. And Peter is confident that this kind of authentic life will eventually produce eternal fruit: ‘they may... glorify God on the day he visits us.’

That would be wonderful, wouldn’t it? But it starts with our hearts. Or, more precisely, our souls. Our spiritual centres. Today, pray for grace to cultivate good thoughts, good desires in our souls. Pray with confidence for forgiveness and cleansing for anything that isn’t good – that’s a prayer God always loves to answer. And may that bear fruit in good lives, whoever we meet and bless today.

Day 14 – 1 Peter 2:13-17 ‘Living free – as servants!’

Followers of Jesus live with a radical freedom. ‘The truth shall set you free,’ our Lord said, and that was God’s plan all along. Free from fear, free from guilt and shame, free to live the life God planned for us. We may not always feel like this – but that is the spiritual reality. This freedom also creates a radical community: the fact that most New Testament letters address, for example, slaves and slave-owners (‘masters’) is testimony to the fact that *both* groups were sat there, listening to this letter in the same Christian meeting. This kind of fluidity, dare I say equality, was unthinkable in the culture around it.

As a result, Christian communities quickly began to be seen by the dominant culture as subversive. Their freedom was dangerous, it undermined cultural values and norms. Occasionally, some followers of Jesus didn’t help themselves, either. They took their freedom too far – sometimes this manifested itself in a lack of personal holiness (see 1 Corinthians), more often in a defiant attitude toward civil government, something like: ‘if we now serve only Jesus, then we don’t need to serve corrupt human authorities!’ This could, of course, be self-reinforcing – badly treated by civil authorities, they might become even more hardened: the first-century equivalent of the football fan singing, ‘no-one likes us, we don’t care.’

Peter tackles this stuff head-on in this section of the letter. We’ve already looked at the internal battle within our souls, a battle which fuels our lifestyle, for good or ill. Yesterday, he focused on unfair persecution; today, however, he acknowledges that sometimes we give people reason to oppose us: (v16) ‘Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.’

In other words, don’t give people reasons to attack or persecute the Christian community. As far as it depends on us, ‘by doing good... silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.’ (v15) He summarises it with another ‘contrast’, another tension: ‘Live as free people... live as God’s slaves.’

The particular, practical advice he gives in this regard relates to civil government. His advice mirrors St Paul’s very closely: unless it’s something which directly interferes with your capacity to follow Jesus, you should obey the civil law, and ‘submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority.’ (v13) Note: this is for *the Lord’s* sake – i.e. it’s not just our reputation at stake here, it’s Jesus’. If his followers are troublemakers for no good reason, that doesn’t do the credibility of the Christian community any good at all.

So, he advises his readers to ‘honour the emperor’ (v17) – note, *not* worship. Only God deserves our worshipful awe (‘fear’ as Peter calls it). Likewise, we show ‘proper respect to everyone.’

It’s good, sensible advice, isn’t it? Peter is candid that we may not always be able to avoid trouble, because we remain ‘foreigners and exiles’ (v11), a minority swimming against the tide. But at least let’s not bring it on ourselves. Today, let’s pray for all followers of Jesus who live in cultures where this is their daily reality. And, if you resonate with this text today, pray for yourself, too, for grace to keep swimming, to live respectfully as far as you can – and above all to live free. We serve a greater Master, who is able to bless us and keep us, in all circumstances. Amen.

Day 15 – 1 Peter 2:18-23 'Unjust suffering'

As St. Peter continues his survey of the practical pressure points we face in living as a follower of Jesus, today he tackles yet another head-on. Yesterday we looked at the importance of not bringing unnecessary trouble on ourselves by not living the right kind of life. Today, Peter faces the thorny question of when we do live a righteous life... and *still* get into trouble for it. What do we do then?

The particular group he addresses in this section are slaves. Slavery was normal in the ancient world, and a significant proportion of the population were slaves. A significant proportion of the church were, too – you can imagine that the message that God loves and values all people equally, and saves all of us by his grace regardless, was certainly good news to all on the margins, and enthusiastically received by many. It's still true today, of course.

As we observed yesterday, the idea that all people are of equal worth and that we serve a Higher Authority was also seen as dangerously subversive. No matter that followers of Jesus were taught to live a life of peace, love and service – surely (the argument goes) this kind of teaching undermines the whole social order? It's worth emphasising that the fact that Peter does not contest the current social order does *not* mean he endorses slavery – this has been a persistent myth peddled by those with power to maintain their privilege. Peter is simply a pragmatist: the Christian community was tiny, fragile and struggling to survive in the face of severe opposition. Trying to overthrow the social order was simply not an option: his precious body of believers needed encouragement to keep going *right now*, day-by-day, and a practical strategy to do so – not 'sunlit uplands'.

Crucially, he points them – and us – back to our supreme example. The uncomfortable fact is that unjust suffering was exactly what our Lord endured (v21) – the one who deserved it least of all. He was falsely accused and insulted, yet he did not lie to save himself (v22) or fight fire with fire (v23): 'Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.' This, therefore, is our pattern, too. And if that sounds weak or self-defeating, then the underlying point here is...

God always repays. He sees those who suffer unjustly and will honour them (v20). Just as Jesus was raised and glorified, so will those who walk in the same way of Jesus, facing suffering or injustice, but bravely choosing the way of Christ. We do things for the Audience of One (v19).

This is challenging stuff – but the principles are timeless. Our God is the same yesterday, today and forever. He still dwells close to all who face similar challenges, he will still honour them and 'raise them up'. Today, let's pray special grace for any we know in this situation. There but for the grace of God...

Day 16 – 1 Peter 2:24-25 ‘Healed by his wounds’

One of the characteristics of the early church leaders is how much in love with Jesus they were, and how easy they found it to praise him; how in awe they were of the gospel of salvation, even after all these years. We encounter this again and again in their writings. Whenever they remind themselves of something to do with the life of Jesus, they can't help but return to the heart of the gospel.

In this instance, Peter has been encouraging his readers to hold fast in times of unjust suffering, pointing them towards Jesus as their supreme model and example. Having done that, it's the most natural thing in the world for him to think of the greatest example of this suffering on our behalf. He's back to first principles; he's back at the foot of the cross. He's just quoted Isaiah 53, and it stirs his mind to those even more famous verses from that great chapter: (v24) “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

The great reversal of the gospel is that Jesus' suffering is our freedom; the injustice wrought against Jesus by humans turned out to enact God's perfect justice (and mercy) for us all; Jesus' wounds bring us healing. Hallelujah!

Isaiah 53 continues: ‘We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ Here, though, Peter adapts that wonderful declaration to remind us that this is about more than our salvation, it is about the restoration of our identity as children of God: (v25) ‘For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.’

Jesus is our Good Shepherd – his readers would likely be very familiar with Psalm 23 (as perhaps we are too), so you can imagine them reflecting on the lines of that great psalm: the one who leads us and guides us, who helps us to rest, provides for us, and (thinking about the difficult situations he's just addressed in this letter) who also journeys with us through the darkest valley. What an encouragement!

He is also the true Boss of our souls, whatever our human masters might believe; or however our sinful inclinations might affect us. Our souls are safe with Him. As we close this chapter of the letter, give thanks that we are healed by Jesus' glorious wounds. And let's commit ourselves once more into the loving arms of the Good Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. Amen.

Day 17 – 1 Peter 2:21-3:8 'Of great worth in God's sight'

I'm sure verses 1-7 of today's passage aroused some strong emotions among many of you! Whenever we read passages like this, there are usually three types of response: those who reject it out of hand, for being out of touch in our modern world; those who want to treat it literally, regardless of the consequences; and those who take a more nuanced view, somewhere in between.

A short reflection can't do justice to the bigger questions, though I've deliberately got us all to read a longer chunk to see where verses 1-7 fit in the narrative of the letter. It is important to remember that the context is one of dealing with 'unjust suffering', which might suggest that Peter's mindset towards women might not be as crusty as you think. He also concludes the section by reminding everyone ('all of you', v8) of their obligations to be sympathetic, compassionate and humble.

Whatever we think about the interpersonal dynamics of the rest, what we can observe in this text are two universal truths which are frequently commended to *all* people, throughout scripture:

The first is the value of integrity: what matters most is not what we say about faith, but the quality of our lives. Peter addresses a specific challenge for those whose spouses do not believe: it is the purity of our lifestyle (v1) which will win them over 'without words' (v2). I think we can legitimately say this applies equally to women and men who face this situation.

Second, what matters is substance and not style. We live in a culture where the 'adornment' of fashion applies pretty much equally to men and women nowadays; so, again, it is legitimate to draw a more universal reflection on this teaching: (v4) 'a gentle and quiet spirit... is of great worth in God's sight.' We've all seen documentaries where the same garments, made in factories with often dubious practices, then have different logos sewn on, which determines whether the garment is sold for £5, £50 or £500. This is not the kingdom way: what matters is the life which wears the garment, which Peter eloquently describes as one of 'unfading beauty'.

For all that, I appreciate that many of you may find this passage a hard read. All the more reason, then, to take a closer look. There is still gold to mine here, unfading beauty to appreciate. May the Lord grant us all grace to live authentic lives, where what we do speaks louder than what we say. And may his Holy Spirit cultivate that 'gentle and quiet spirit' within each of us; whoever we are, this is of great worth in God's sight.

Day 18 – 1 Peter 3:8-13 ‘The Lord’s way’

‘I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.’ These chilling words from Genesis 4 brutally lay bare a fundamental flaw in the human condition. Once sin enters the world, we become our own gods, which in this case means agents of our own vengeance. The problem, of course, is that revenge escalates. Lamech kills in response to a wound, repays evil with worse again.

God limits this human tendency in the Law by insisting that justice means ‘an eye for an eye’ – in other words, the punishment is proportionate to the crime. This is the foundation of all our modern justice systems, and rightly so; but in the kingdom of Jesus, even this isn’t the limit of our capacity to love: ‘But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.’

Jesus’ famous teaching from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:44-45) takes the path of true righteousness to another level entirely. The ultimate way to overcome evil, Jesus insists, is with good. And it’s clear from this short passage today that Peter is reminding his readers of this teaching of Jesus. He quotes a psalm rather than Jesus’ words, but the thrust is the same: (v9) ‘Do not pay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called.’ Called by Jesus himself, in his own words on this subject.

It is a hard teaching, possibly the hardest of all of Jesus’ amazing wisdom. Our natural response is to hit back (harder), to fight fire with (more) fire. To pray, to bless, to respond to evil with goodness seems almost impossible. In human terms, it probably is. Only the Spirit of Christ can cultivate this extraordinary capacity for generosity in us, because it was Christ himself who manifested this way of living most notably. We need his transforming presence, to be able to do the same. It is nothing less than a revolution of the heart.

But we have a great promise to motivate us: not only is this the way of Christ, but it also commands a blessing (v9) – indeed, it is our ‘inheritance’, the use of the word here being significant, since it is something which is already promised to all in God’s family. In other words, we don’t earn it, we *inherit*. It’s all grace.

This is important, because it saves us from treating Peter’s encouragements as some sort of divine slot machine: put the hard graft of good works and good words in, get a heavenly reward out. Rather, our following of the way of Christ safeguards and manifests the new life and the inheritance we already have, by his glorious grace. Thanks to Jesus, God’s eyes are already turned towards us; his ears are already attentive to our prayers (v12).

Nevertheless, this is a challenging passage. Knowing how to practise good in situations of injustice requires much wisdom, and I would encourage all who find themselves in this situation to seek the counsel of other mature followers of Jesus, as well as covering in prayer. But, by faith, we trust it is still the path to life, to freedom, and to blessing. May the Lord grant all of grace to walk this path, whenever it confronts us, knowing that our future is secure and that his grace is always sufficient. For when we are weak, then we are strong.

Day 19 – 1 Peter 3:13-17 ‘The hope that we have’

Our lives speak all the week. This is the basic reality that Peter knows as well as anyone, and which underpins much of his teaching in this letter. Peter himself famously stumbled with his words just when he needed them most, so he understands that not all of us find it easy to share our faith. He also understands that most of his readers were living in tiny Christian communities under severe pressure, so they needed a practical strategy for survival. He returns to these themes again in today's passage: make sure Jesus is first in your hearts (v15) and keep a clear conscience (v16) i.e. don't bring difficulties on yourself by not living right. He also reminds them that our determination to do good is unconditional, regardless of circumstances or approval (v17), and that what we have is a real hope, a promise we can rely on (v15).

That said, he does now turn to the question of how we might witness more openly to our faith. Let's assume that we're living the kind of life he advocates, what should we do next? He gives them three very useful pieces of advice:

First, be eager to do good (v13) – let's note the subtle distinction here. It is possible to do good grudgingly. Faced with opposition, we might decide that doing good is necessary, but only because we have to. It speaks volumes if we retain an enthusiasm to practise good, to (as the prophet puts it), act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. May the Lord grant us all grace not to get weary of doing good.

Second, be prepared (v15). But if you're wondering how much preparation you need to do, here's what he says: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.' All you need to prepare is a *reason* for the hope that you have. Not something polished or intellectual – just why Jesus has made a difference to your life. That's it – your story. So, the only thing you might want to do today during your time with the Lord is to remind yourself: what is the reason for the hope that you have? Get that in your head, and then be prepared to say it, if the opportunity arises.

Finally, be gentle and respectful (v15). If someone responds negatively to what we say, then this is where this bit of advice is most useful. Don't get defensive, don't go on the attack. Be gentle and respectful, and leave the rest to God.

It's simple stuff, isn't it? We can all do this! Be eager to do good, be prepared with a simple reason, and be gentle and respectful. We rarely know when our next chance to share something about Jesus will come along; but, today, let's pray that when it comes, we can put this into practice, that others might know the wonderful, eternal, life-bringing hope that we have. Amen.

Day 20 – 1 Peter 3:18 ‘To bring us to God’

If you had to summarise the good news of the Christian faith, how would you do it? What would you say?

St Peter has just been encouraging his readers to do just that – to be prepared ‘to give a reason for the hope that [they] have.’ Helpfully – deliberately? – he gives his own summary straight after, and it’s one which is so good, so concise, it’s a brilliant verse for any of us to memorise as our ‘reason’ (today I’m going to quote it in the NRSV translation, which is very close to the original 1984 NIV, not the newer version I usually use):

‘For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.’

For Christ suffered... to bring us to God. That’s the basic idea, the heart of our good news – Christ brings us to God through his suffering. How?

For sins: sacrifice. Our selfishness separates us from God, and needs to be put right. Christ died for the sin – the fallenness, the brokenness, the selfishness – of every person who ever lived. Everything we’ve said, done or thought which dishonoured God. Everything we didn’t say or do or think which we should have. It’s all dealt with. Every last thing.

Once for all: sufficient. Because Jesus, the divine Son, was perfect, this sacrifice didn’t need to be repeated. Previous forms of atonement were all temporary, and indeed many religions nowadays still use regular or repeated rituals to appease their deities. Not so for the follower of Jesus: his sacrifice was for everyone, for all time. Once for all – and everyone, even all of us now, are covered by it, should we choose to believe it.

The righteous for the unrighteous: substitute. We can’t save ourselves. Our sin makes that impossible. Only a perfect substitute can take our place: a real human who can represent us; a real God who can intervene for us. This is not an angry God punishing his innocent son; the mystery of the Trinity is that this is God Himself (in the form of His Son) taking the punishment on our behalf. The righteous for the unrighteous; saving those who cannot save themselves.

Wow. 19 words, and it’s all there! Not a bad summary, is it?! To belt and brace it, he also reminds us that this life-giving work involves the Spirit, who raises Jesus, and therefore us, to new life. (As an aside, here again we see the beginnings of Trinitarian theology: this understanding that we worship a three-dimensional God: Father, Son and Spirit.)

What a verse for us today! One for the ages, the heart of our good news. Also, one that’s very precious to me. May it speak to you powerfully, too – filling you with hope, and making your heart sing. Amen.

Day 21 – 1 Peter 3:18-22 ‘Saved by Jesus’ resurrection’

Here’s a tough text to grapple with! I can’t possibly do justice to all the learned theories written about verses 19-20, so I’ll give you my best summary of what all this means. Let’s start with the story of Noah’s Ark, right at the beginning of the bible. It’s a story of judgement and salvation: judgement on the universal wickedness of the world, and salvation of Noah and his family; crucially the water in the story was integral to both elements of the story, bringing judgement via the flood, but also enabling salvation (as the ark floated on it and was thereby saved).

Jewish tradition held that one of the root causes of the depth of human wickedness which led to the Flood was the activity of evil spirits or fallen angels – these are the spirits mentioned in v19 (an interpretation which is strengthened by similar mentions in 2 Peter 2:4 and also Jude 6-7). Jesus is not trying to ‘save’ these spirits, but to proclaim his triumph over them – over the forces which have held humanity captive since the Fall.

If the story of the Flood and the Ark is ultimately a story about the judgement of the world and the salvation of the righteous, Peter is making the point that Jesus’ death is also about exactly the same things. The whole world is being judged on the cross – only this time Jesus is taking the punishment on everyone’s behalf; as it says in v18, which we thought about last time: ‘for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous’.

Thanks to Jesus, and just like Noah, the righteous can now be saved – only this time it’s *Jesus’* righteousness which saves us. This is why baptism matters: when we get baptised, we are enacting this judgment and salvation in a physical way, through a particular ceremony, which – like Noah – also uses water to symbolise both: judged as we go into the water (‘dead to sin’), and cleansed and restored as we rise out of it to new life...

...Only this time, it’s not the water itself which saves, something Peter makes clear in v21, lest anyone think that somehow we just have to perform a ritual to sort things out with God: ‘not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’

It is Jesus’ resurrection which ultimately brings us life: it is proof of his divine status, of his defeat of sin and death, and also that he is able to grant life to all who follow him. The story of Noah lays the foundations for our understanding both of judgement and of salvation; but *only Jesus enables it to be a life-giving reality for all*. The life of the Spirit he enjoys (v18) is ours now, by his grace.

As we begin our week, give thanks that this glorious Jesus has saved us by his resurrection, and now imparts his life-giving Spirit to us, and to many millions of people all across the world. This same Jesus is now ascended into glory (as we celebrate on Ascension Day every year), with all powers in submission to him (v22). He has all we need for today, for this week, and always. Amen.

Day 22 – 1 Peter 4:1-6 ‘Done with sin’

On the Sunday before writing this, I was privileged to lead a baptism service. As is our custom, we gathered at the front of church and I introduced what was about to happen, including these words: ‘dying to sin, that we may live his (Jesus’) risen life.’ It’s emotive language, isn’t it? We don’t talk about ‘trying not to sin’, or just doing our best – we talk about a permanent change: when we turn to Jesus, we die to sin.

As we’ve been looking at over the last couple of reflections, this strong language is rooted in the theology of our salvation. Jesus literally died and rose again to save us; when we come to Christ and are baptised, we enact this same reality in a spiritual and symbolic way: dying to sin as we go into the water, and rising to new life with Jesus as we come out of it. From the point we turn to Jesus, we are done with sin.

This is exactly the phrase Peter uses here, as we begin chapter 4. The context here, though, is much debated. Is the suffering in the body he talks of in v1 just Jesus’ suffering, or does it also refer to suffering we also ourselves experience? The majority of scholars agree that the best way to read this text is the most straightforward: building on what Peter has already said, it is Jesus’ suffering which saves us, and, since Jesus conquered sin through suffering, all those who follow him are likewise ‘done with sin’. This is the ‘same attitude’ all followers of Jesus should have.

It is possible, though, given that Peter is also talking about the very real suffering some of his readers are experiencing, that he is also referencing their own experience. Any of us who have suffered as a direct result of our faith, through some sort of persecution, often experience a particular closeness to Jesus, a sense of his presence and love which makes what might previously have been sinful temptations and desires seem paltry by comparison. It’s a shadow, if you like, of what Jesus experienced on our behalf. That said, we need to be careful not to push this idea too far – some have misinterpreted this verse to make themselves ‘suffer’ (e.g. by masochistic practices) to try and ‘conquer’ their sin, a dangerous ideology which has led to abuse. So, if we allow any thought that suffering may refine the purity of our life (which it can), may that only ever be trials that happen to us, not those we consciously inflict on ourselves or others.

In practice, what does it mean to be ‘done with sin’? Peter lays out the choice which faces all of us: to follow ‘the will of God’ (v2) or ‘what pagans choose to do’ (v3) – a lifestyle he lays out in striking detail in the rest of that verse. It’s clear that many of Peter’s readers lived in that culture, and turned their backs on it when they came to Christ – as a result of which, they were facing hardship and opposition. Their former friends now ‘heap abuse on’ them (v4, the word literally means ‘blaspheme’, a reference to the fact that this kind of living was dedicated to various pagan deities in the culture of that time, it wasn’t ‘secular’ as we would interpret it nowadays).

Peter reminds his readers that what God thinks of all this is what ultimately matters (v5), and concludes this short section with another much-debated verse (v6). We could spend much time reviewing the arguments, but the best analysis is again the simplest: the dead who had the gospel preached to them were simply followers of Jesus who have already died. Bear in mind that much of the early church expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, so the death of followers was a painful problem; did it mean they had been disobedient or weren’t saved? No, not at all – as Peter affirms, they will ‘live according to God in regard to the spirit’ (v6). Their salvation, their future, is secure.

It’s another tough text – but the message is simple: if we follow Jesus, we are done with sin; we have a new life, and now we live according to God’s will. It’s not easy, but it is the path to eternal life. May the Lord grant us all grace to walk in that path today; and may he continue to rescue those who are trapped in a different lifestyle they desperately want to leave. The gospels remind us that these are the people Jesus often spent time with, to bring his message of forgiveness and healing; may his Spirit inspire us to compassion and prayer, not judgement. Amen.

Day 23 – 1 Peter 4:7-11 ‘The end is nigh’

I’m sure some of you seeing that phrase – ‘the end is nigh’ – will have thought what I did, of the people walking up and down your local high street, wearing a big sandwich board with those very words! I must confess I haven’t seen one for many years, but it was certainly a common feature of British high streets in years gone by. The end is nigh – so what should we do?

Interestingly, Peter – who gave us this famous phrase – doesn’t tell his readers to wear it down the street! What he does do instead is give us four very practical tips for how to live, ready for Jesus to return:

Pray watchfully (v7). It may now be 2,000 years since Jesus promised to return, but that doesn’t mean we live as if it’s not going to happen anytime soon. The great saints of history all believed that Jesus was about to come back – they may not have seen it, but they lived more prayerfully and purposefully as a result. We are still called to read the signs of the times, and to pray with alert and sober minds, for our world and for the church.

Love deeply (v8). Two iconic phrases in two verses! Peter encourages us to love each other deeply, because ‘love covers over a multitude of sins.’ In light of yesterday’s passage, this most likely refers to those carrying guilt from their past, who need compassion and support. But of course it also refers more widely to the primacy of love, which enables all relationships to flourish – a theme also very much echoed by Paul (e.g. Colossians 3:14).

Host generously (v9). Hospitality was a big feature of the early church. It was a very concrete form of practising the kind of unconditional love and welcome which Jesus offers us. Many fruitful spiritual conversations would also happen around the table – and still do. Peter encourages us to do the same – without grumbling!

Steward faithfully (vv10-11). We all have different gifts (v10) – the key is to use them, to serve God and others. We do this ultimately in God’s strength, and for his glory (v11) – it is always God who builds up the church; but he needs his faithful people to offer their gifts, providing the material with which he can build most effectively.

As we offer ourselves to the Lord today, which of these encouragements speaks most to you? Pray for grace to act upon it today, trusting the Lord for the fruit. ‘To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.’

Day 24 – 1 Peter 4:12-19 ‘Committed to our faithful Creator’

Some years ago, I read an interview with a Chinese pastor, who described the challenges the underground church had suffered in his country. Towards the end of the interview, the interviewer assured him of the prayers of many Christians around the world that the persecution would end. The pastor was shocked. No, he said, don't pray for it to end, for our suffering has caused the amazing growth you want to hear about today!

This kind of attitude may seem strange to our ears, and to many in the West, where we rarely have to face real persecution for our faith. But the attitude of this pastor echoes a strand of our discipleship which goes right back to the first church and its original leaders. After being flogged and ordered not to speak about Jesus, 'the apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.' (Acts 5:41)

St Peter, of course, was one of those apostles referred to in that verse, so as he writes this letter many years later, he knows exactly what he is talking about, when, in today's passage, he draws together the strands of a theme which has occupied much of the letter: that of how we respond to opposition to our faith – and especially the suffering we might experience for holding fast to what we believe and practise. Let's clarify here that, in this case, the suffering to which St Peter is referring is not the general suffering of, say, illness or bereavement; rather, this is specifically what we experience as a direct result of our faith and witness.

As he summarises everything he has taught on this subject, he reminds his readers – and us – of two things: first, suffering is unsurprising (v12) – it is part and parcel of following Jesus. This is a sobering truth, but the second thing is its antidote: if suffering is unsurprising, suffering is also glory (v13). Jesus identifies most closely with those who suffer for his Name, and those who experience this kind of trial often testify to how close Jesus is to them, how often they see miraculous answers to prayer, how many 'divine appointments' they receive.

If these are the two realities of life as a follower of Jesus, there are also two practical bits of advice from someone who has 'been there and done it'; bearing all this in mind, Peter draws this section of the letter to a close with two very simple principles which enable us to meet this kind of suffering head-on (v19): first, we 'commit ourselves to our faithful Creator.' Ultimately, we can trust in the character of God: He made us, and He is faithful. He always has our best interests at heart.

Second, we 'continue to do good.' It may be hard when we face opposition for this, but, as Peter has said several times previously, we should keep doing it anyway, because we're doing it for God, not for anyone else. Today, may the Lord grant us all grace to continue doing good, as a sign of our faithful commitment. And may we do so, trusting that 'the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.' Amen.

Day 25 – 1 Peter 5:1-4 ‘True shepherds of the flock’

Serving in an ecumenical church I get called all kinds of things! Those from a Catholic or high church background will call me ‘Father’, Anglicans may call me Reverend, and those from an evangelical or Pentecostal background usually call me ‘Pastor’. I don’t really care, they’re all valid terms – but the last one is particularly important, as it means ‘Shepherd.’ But very few people are actual shepherds nowadays – what does it really mean? How do we make best use of it in a modern church?

‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.’ Probably the most famous verse of the bible – the beginning of Psalm 23 and David’s heartfelt description of his relationship with his Lord. And this iconic Psalm gives us a good guide to the role of a shepherd, in both a literal and a spiritual sense. The shepherd provides, protects, guides, nourishes and leads; ultimately the shepherd is simply *there* – always with his flock, seeking their flourishing.

All good stuff, and integral to how we might define a minister, even now. Today’s passage, however, takes our understanding of a true shepherd, a true pastor of God’s flock, a bit further; in verses 2-3, St Peter defines the work of a spiritual shepherd primarily in terms of character:

First, a shepherd leads out of desire, not duty: ‘not because you must, but because you are willing.’

Second, a shepherd seeks to give, not to get: ‘not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.’

Third, a shepherd practises humility, not hubris: ‘not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.’

Our model, as always, is Jesus, whom Peter describes as the ‘Chief Shepherd’ (v4). In a sense, all church leaders are only Under-Shepherds, serving the Chief. And sadly, we all know of leaders who have fallen prey to any of these pitfalls: lifeless duty, or the temptations of wealth or pride. It takes discipline and resilience to keep eagerly choosing the path of humility and service. We can only do it in the strength of the Chief Shepherd, allowing His Spirit to keep transforming our hearts. We carry always before us the example of Christ, our inspiration and our challenge.

Today, let’s pray for our pastors/shepherds, that they might model this kind of life and ministry. May each of them daily remind themselves that, despite the cost, the prize is eternal: they will ‘receive the crown of glory that will never pass away.’ (v4) The Lord truly is their shepherd, too; they shall not want. Amen.

Day 26 – 1 Peter 5:5-7 ‘He cares for you’

We live in anxious times. Anxiety has always been a feature of human society, but it seems particularly prevalent at present. About 20% of the UK population admits to feeling anxious all or most of the time, and almost three quarters feel anxiety sometimes. There are many things to worry about: personal circumstances and global events; health, income, family and future; the small things we might be able to change and the big things we are pretty sure we can't.

Where do we take our anxiety? How do we reduce it? A balanced answer to that question should highlight a number of things: good diet and exercise, supportive relationships, the natural world (being out in creation has a significant positive effect on our wellbeing, scientifically proven).

All this is good, and right. But there is one other answer, the one we need most: (v7) 'Cast all your anxiety on him (God) because he cares for you.' We need more than strategies to reduce anxiety, we need *someone* to carry it. Someone who can take the 'bags' of worries which weigh us down and hold them in our stead. That person is God.

It's very easy to try and take the bags back, though, isn't it? To want to carry them ourselves again. Casting our anxiety onto God is a daily, even hourly discipline; it takes courage and perseverance. It also requires confidence in the character of God: '...because he cares for you.'

There's one other thing we need, in order to see real change through this advice. This verse is often quoted, and rightly so; but the verses before it form the backdrop to this famous piece of wisdom. Peter reminds his readers about the importance of humility, of 'humbling yourselves... under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.' There can be pride in our anxiety. We carry our burdens because we don't want to let others help: 'no,' we say, 'I want to carry this myself. No-one else has to.' We might even feel this before God – that somehow it's a failure to let Him help. Have none of that, says Peter: choose humility before God, trust that He will lift you up – and then you'll also find yourself more able to give your anxiety and burdens to Him, too.

Today, give your anxiety to God – whatever it is. Let Him carry it, and keep choosing to release it to God whenever you feel tempted (and you will) to pick it back up again. This God cares for you. Always.

Day 27 – 1 Peter 5:8-11 ‘Standing firm’

Dieter ‘Didi’ Senft is one of the great characters of the Tour de France – my favourite annual sporting event. He’s not a cyclist – at least not a professional one – or a team manager, or a tour organiser, or even part of the extraordinary entertainment machine that packages the world’s most popular race, by number of visitors (average of 12 million watching by the roadside each year).

No, Didi is a devil. Literally. His name to Tour fans all around the world is Didi the Devil, and his ‘job’, if I can put it like that, is to attend every stage of every tour every year since 1993, dressed in a red costume, complete with horns and a pitchfork. As the cyclists pass his motorhome on each stage, he runs alongside them, jumping up and down and waving his pitchfork. Crazy, yes; but after 33 years (only missing 2012 through ill health) and well over 600 stages, he has become a legend in his own right. L’Etape magazine even summarises his presence on the Tour as symbolising ‘a moment that evokes positive emotions: joy, playfulness, eternal youth, cheerfulness, life = a game, wakening an inner child of each of us ... With a little magic all worries are forgotten.’

Strange way to describe a devil! But Didi symbolises a sanitised version of how many people picture him: a sort of darkly comic creation, creepy but relatively harmless. However, it’s definitely *not* how the bible represents the devil – something which today’s passage bluntly reminds us: (v8) ‘Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.’ That’s altogether more sobering. If Jesus is the true and ultimately triumphant Lion of Judah, there is another lion – the Scar to Jesus’ Simba, if you will – a lion we need keep an eye out for.

The important thing when it comes to how we understand the devil, as C S Lewis wisely reminds us, is neither to make too much of him nor too little. No-one who knew there was a lion nearby would be complacent; at the same time, many millions of people live near lions and have to go about their daily lives just the same, relying primarily on just being alert (v8).

Peter’s advice is similarly wise, and straightforward: alongside being alert, we are to be realistic (‘sober mind’ v8), and resist (v9). If this sounds vague, Paul’s advice in the letter to the Ephesians is that we have the armour of righteousness (right living), faith and salvation, alongside the weapons of God’s word and prayer. We don’t attack, but this armour and weaponry allows us to resist, to ‘stand firm in the faith.’

It’s not something we undergo alone, either: we stand firm together (v9), and ultimately in the power and strength of the Lord (v10). Lions generally only ever attack isolated prey. If they confront a group, they try to separate one from the rest – they never go after all of them. In the same way, if we stay plugged into the Christian community, and our relationship with the Lord, we are ‘safe’. So, as we pray today, let’s pray not just for protection, but for community – for ourselves, and also for all who need it currently. And may the Lord make us all ‘strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.’

Day 28 – 1 Peter 5:12-14 ‘Peace to all of you’

I’m always writing PS’s. It’s natural for many of us to want to add a line or a paragraph to a piece of text we’ve just written. Maybe we’ve forgotten something; or maybe we want to reinforce something, offer some additional greetings or encouragement. What’s true for us is also true for the church leaders who wrote the letters which form the second half of the New Testament. Writing material was expensive, every square inch of paper (or equivalent) had to be used.

As Peter ends his letter – which he does formally in verse 11 – he now wants to add a few final lines, and in doing so, he makes it clear that it was his friend and co-leader Silas who had written down the content that Peter had dictated to him, until this point. But this last small section – Peter’s PS – was probably written by Peter himself, just as Paul did on a number of occasions (e.g. Galatians 6:11, Colossians 4:18).

Peter takes the opportunity to remind his readers that his purpose was to share the true grace of God, and to encourage them to stand firm (v12). I hope over these last few weeks we have received similar encouragement. Peter’s wonderful letter has reminded us of the glory of Christ’s resurrection, and our joy as ‘resurrected people’; the promise of strength in our present trials and hope for the future; our secure and privileged status as the family of Christ; and the need to keep loving, and standing with, each other.

Peter also sends greetings from his fellow-believers in Rome (the Babylon referred to in v13). Given that Peter only visited Rome at the end of his life, as a prisoner, and that he does not mention Paul, who had left Rome (temporarily) after his first release from prison cAD62, this little snippet allows us to date the letter to approximately 62-65 AD. The fact that Silas is with him, and also Mark, shows not only the support that the Christian community offered each other, but its unity of leadership at this stage. Silas and Mark both served with Paul, too; the writer Eusebius was later to declare that Mark was the scribe who in effect recorded Peter’s life of Jesus – which became Mark’s gospel.

Peter’s encouragement to his readers to ‘greet one another with a kiss of love’ reminds us that these letters were read aloud to a whole church community as they gathered. It’s amazing to imagine what that must have been like, hearing the legendary old leader’s words read directly to you! Although the ‘kiss of peace’ was later formalised as a ritual by the church, in the first generation it was a simple declaration of the importance of our unity and commitment to each other.

Finally, Peter ends where he began (1:2): bestowing a blessing of peace on all of us who read it (v14). As we conclude our own time spent with Peter, may that blessing of peace rest upon us, too. As one commentator neatly puts it: ‘The roar of the lion or the flames of persecution cannot overthrow the *shalom* of Christ’s salvation.’ Amen, come Lord Jesus.