

1 Peter 1:3-9

A living hope

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I read through the bible readings for this week, I couldn't help but notice the very strong theme of hope in the midst of suffering. In the gospel reading the disciples are fearful, thinking they will be next to suffer through a painful crucifixion at the hands of the Jewish leaders. And Jesus appears among them and proclaims peace, and instead of fear, they are filled with joy and hope. In the readings from Acts, where Peter addressed the crowd, he quotes from Psalm 16, which is also assigned for today, and it says:

Therefore, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

This is King David writing with great hope, knowing that God is our refuge and strength, and in his presence, we need not despair.

But then we have the most direct, and most encouraging passage from First Peter. And St Peter is writing to what he calls the diaspora. This means exiles, people who are living in a foreign land. And I think we can identify with this in our current circumstances. You still live in the same house on the same road, but the society around you is almost unrecognizable. You might very well feel like some stranger living in a foreign land.

But when Peter addresses his letter this diaspora, that's not their main identity, not the main reason he's writing to them. Peter doesn't primarily address these people in terms of their ancestry, their moral background, their social status, their wealth or poverty, or indeed the society where they happen to live. No, he's writing to those "who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood." This is a reminder of their true identity. Not as strangers in a foreign land, but as holy people of God.

Historically, this passage was read at a baptismal service with the purpose of strengthening the faith of the baptised as they find themselves now living as exiles in an alien culture. And for us, it can be easy to forget our basic identity as Christians, as baptised children of God, and so it's good to be reminded of it on a regular basis. So what Saint Peter writes next is for you also, because you are chosen by God, sanctified by the Spirit, and washed clean by the blood of the lamb.

Then we get to our text for today. And Peter launches into one big long sentence that goes from verse three all the way to verse 12. This whole section is an introduction to his epistle, and it's a declaration of God's mercy at work in our lives. It's a celebration of God's gracious character and activity as the means by which to make sense of the paradoxical life of Peter's audience. They are suffering in various kinds of trials, but have great hope in God their saviour.

In some ways, this beginning of First Peter is a blessing upon God's people, a blessing that overflows with joy and hope. And that blessing is grounded in the fact that God has given them a new birth through Jesus' resurrection and has made them members of God's own household. God has given them an inheritance and the honour that their society denies them. Even if they are suffering at the moment, they can trust that God is reliable and that their lives and their futures are in God's hands. No matter how fiery the trials that their faith may endure, God can be counted on, not only to rescue them in the future but to give them joy and hope even in the midst of their suffering. These are people who probably did not witness the resurrection of Jesus, and though even now they do not see him in the flesh, they know him and put their trust in him. This trust, this confidence in the one whom they have come to know and love, sustains them even when their society strips away everything else that might give them a sense of worth and a sense of place. Because God loves and protects and honours them, they can endure their neighbours' scorn. All this because of the faithfulness of God.

Did you notice how Peter identifies God as the primary actor throughout this passage? God has given new birth. God has raised Jesus from the dead. God has reserved for you an inheritance. God has guarded his people. God has sent the Holy Spirit. So when it comes to the future promises, to the hope we have, this is not just wishful thinking. We know God is faithful. We know God is at work for the sake of his chosen people, giving them this great and living hope for the future.

This has been true all through the history of God and his people. Abraham wandered in faith and hope toward an inheritance which had been promised to him by God. The Israelites wandered in the desert on their way to Canaan. The exiles held out hope in Babylon awaiting the day when they could return to Jerusalem. And we are part of this. The first step toward the New Jerusalem began with the resurrection of our saviour, Jesus Christ, and through faith in his sacrifice, we too will reach our divinely appointed destination. And we too are people, who, by the mercy of God, have been chosen for a particular purpose. And so we live our lives in hope.

We, like all Christians live this strange double life that Peter mentions. He addresses his audience as 'foreigners' or 'aliens', not because they have emigrated to where they now live but because they now have a dual citizenship. They are, simultaneously, inhabitants of the places he names, and also citizens of God's new world. The same is true for us. We have been claimed by God in baptism, set aside to be part of his holy family. God's new creation has already come into being through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Through that sacrificial death on the one hand and the indwelling of God's spirit on the other hand, God sets his people apart. They are therefore to be 'holy', both in the technical sense that God has set them apart for this purpose and in the practical sense that their actual lives have been transformed. This is the new birth that Saint Peter speaks of. Through both Gods actions in the past and God's promises for the future, our lives have been transformed in the present.

In the present, though we may suffer through various trials, because we have this new birth, because we have been transformed, because we have the promises for the future, we live in hope. And with this hope for the future, Peter's words of encouragement serve a purpose similar to that of the risen Christ speaking to a huddled and fearful group of disciples, when he says, "Peace be with you" (John 20:21). Like the disciples, we need not live in fear of our present circumstances. In fact, it goes one step further. Not only is there no need to live in fear, but we are called to proclaim the hope we have to the world. "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you", Jesus said.

Now what that sending looks like in our present time is a little different, and it may take some imagination and Spirit-filled wisdom to do it. But we do have the great joy of a living hope because of Christ's victory over death. And we have this great joy and hope even in the midst of sufferings.

Like King David, we too can proclaim, "my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices." We know our future is secure in Jesus Christ. We know that he has guaranteed our salvation through his death on a cross and resurrection to life again. We know that because of his presence with us through the Holy Spirit, we need not live in fear, but in peace.

So as our Easter celebrations continue, even in these strange times, may you give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. May you thank God for his great mercy towards you, that he has indeed given you a new birth into a living hope. And may you know the inexpressible joy that is found only in Christ Jesus our Lord, who is bringing you salvation and life with him forever. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.