

1 Peter 1:22-25

Eternal hope

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

As this year draws to a close, I know many people are eager to move on from everything that 2020 has brought us. But there's nothing magical about the numbers changing on our arbitrary measures of time. Days, months, and years can pass on by, and we still face the same reality. For many, this year has given cause for despair, and they are desperately looking for anything to give them hope. Some find hope in the roll-out of a vaccine, others in the quick shutting of state borders, or finding the perfect system to quarantine travellers so there is no way of the virus escaping.

The big problem is that none of this makes any difference to our mortality. Maybe we'll avoid becoming a COVID-19 statistic, but all of us will face death one day. This doesn't mean we pay no attention to our own safety and wellbeing, but it should give focus to where we place our hope. In the epistle reading tonight we are given only one alternative. Peter quotes from the prophet Isaiah, telling us:

All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.

Every human achievement is still only human, limited by the very fact of our temporary existence. But one thing endures forever. And this is where our hope should lie.

When Isaiah first spoke these words, it was to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. They had lost almost all hope. They were discouraged. They were cut off from the land they knew, from all the usual interactions with friends and family. The 'good news' for Israel was that God fulfils his promises and that the nations of the world that seem strong cannot resist his promised word to deliver them from exile.

Even the strongest earthly powers are still only human. They are still flesh, still wither like grass and fall like flowers. Isaiah was reminding the people of Israel of the transience of human life. It quite literally can be here today and gone tomorrow. In the context of being invaded and oppressed and exiled, this is comforting. The Babylonian empire was not permanent and eternal. It too was made up of fallible humans, and one day it too would fall.

But when Peter quotes this verse as he writes to the Christians in the early church, it takes on a different character. It's no longer about looking out there to the enemy but looking inside yourself. This is a timely reminder that our own efforts, our own achievements, even our own desires, are not permanent and eternal. And neither are our lives. But God's word endures forever. And this is where our hope is found. Because God's word makes certain promises to us. Promises that give us a future. Promises that give us comfort and strength.

This enduring word is good news that has been proclaimed to you. This enduring word is the gospel message. The message regarding Christ Jesus and what he has done for you. And it's not just a message that is spoken to you, it's a message that takes root within you. Peter had already explained this before he quotes from Isaiah. He writes:

You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

This is why the enduring word of God gives us such hope and comfort and strength. It has already done its work in us. It's not a promise that remains out there, remains far off, and one day we hope to see it fulfilled. No, it is done. You have been born again by water and the spirit, and this is an eternal new birth.

And that is why we are reminded at funerals of what St Paul writes in Romans 6:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

Part of this we also quote as we regularly celebrate our baptism anniversaries, as we have done tonight.

We realise that our first birth, our normal human birth, was of the 'flesh', and we have inherited everything that that entails. Whatever is born of the flesh is destined to die and decay. This explains why humanity cannot permanently hold civilization together. It is all based on human flesh and is destined to fall apart. Like the beauty of new flowers at springtime, our works look successful for a time, but then they start to decay and die.

Knowing that, it is clearly foolish to place our hope in anything of human origin. But the word of God, the good news, is living and everlasting. We have been given new birth through God's word. And this life into which we have been reborn is unending. And not unending in the sense of an infinite number of days and months and years, which we will forever be counting away. No, it is eternal in nature, just as God is eternal. This means it exists outside the bounds of time. So, for example, St Paul can write in Ephesians, that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world. And John, in Revelation, can describe Jesus as the Lamb who was slain before the foundations of the earth.

Our rebirth through baptism and the life that it brings is eternal, in that it exists outside the bounds of time. But for now, we still mark the days and months and years as we continue to also live in the flesh. And as we do, various times give us special reason to pause and reflect. Tonight is one of those times. And my intention is that you are reflecting tonight on where your hope lies. Does it lie only in things of this world, things that are temporary and fleeting? Or does your hope lie in Christ Jesus, in his promises to you, in his word which endures forever, and in his saving grace, which has given new birth? I pray that as we close off another year on our calendars, that you do continue to look to him who does give eternal hope, and that you trust in him as your eternal Lord and Saviour. Amen.

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