

Church and Society

Series: Strangers and Neighbours: Learning to Be Christian in a Post Christian World from 1 Peter

Date: 14 August 2022, 9th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Jeremiah 29.1-7; 1 Peter 2.4-17; Matthew 5.1-16

In 1911 96% of Australians identified as Christian on the census. In last year's census that figure dropped to under 50% for the first time. Other surveys indicate maybe 7% attend church weekly. In 1911, even if most of the population wasn't in church on a Sunday, Christianity still gave a shared moral framework for Australians and the church was seen as a moral authority. That has not been for some time. When the church or Christians are in the media it is for one of two things: moral failure, or a conflict between biblical and "secular" morality. This shift means that we as Christians increasingly stand out as different from wider Australian society. Religion can no longer be private when it necessarily means living in a way that is distinct from those around you. Think of the Muslim woman wearing a hijab or praying 5 times a day as required by Islam. That is now true for Christians as well. We cannot hide. We are all public disciples, whether we like it or not. If that is the case we had better get on with learning how to be public disciples.

The public nature of our faith has always been part of St George's. Our church building has a very public presence. Our tower has stood as a beacon of hope over Hobart since 1847. It's one of the reasons I love being the minister here, because I'm wired to be public with my faith. My great hope is to teach you how to be public with your faith. That's why I speak about the intersection of Christianity and culture. It's why it's in our vision. We sent out to shine the light of Christ as public disciples. And what does that mean? It's being confident and secure in who we are as adopted children of God. It's being sensitive to those outside the church, to love them, to listen to them and understand them, and to notice how they perceive us. It's to have a Christlike character marked by humility, grace and generosity. It's bearing witness to Christ in what we say and do.

1 Peter is a great book to learn how to be public disciples. What gives heat to the public conflict between "secular" and biblical morality is the question of what ought the church's relationship to society be. That's a question we all face, whether you're a Christian or not. And our text today, 1 Peter 2:4-17, answers that key question - what is to be the church's relationship to the society in which it finds itself. We're going to look at 2 points. The Church towards God, verses 4-10 and the Church towards Society, verses 11-17. It's that dual identity theme that we saw at the start of the letter - chosen by God, strangers in the world. Let's have a look at what the Bible says together.

1. Church towards God - 4-10

Who we are as Christians and as the church is defined not over and against the society around us, but rather who we are in relation to God. 1 Peter 2.4-10 lays out our corporate identity in relation to God. Read with me verse 4.

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – **5** you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Who we are is defined by Jesus. He is “the living stone” to whom we come. The “cornerstone”. The picture of the cornerstone can be one of two things. Either the first stone laid by which all other stones in a building take their orientation. Or the capstone at the top of an arch that holds everything together. Either way the picture works. Jesus is at the centre of the church. He defines who we are and holds us together. Everyone who comes to Christ becomes a living stone, like him, that is built to form a spiritual house. In 1 Corinthians Paul calls the church the temple of the Holy Spirit. Our building is the beautiful place that we as St George’s call home. But it is not the church. Rather the church is those living stones sitting next to you.

Peter goes to town with the stone metaphor quoting from Isaiah and Psalms.

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,’

8 and,

‘A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.’

His point is that the church is made up of those who respond to Jesus in faith. But that is not the only possible response to Jesus. Others may reject him. Either Jesus is the rock upon which you build your life, or he’s a stone that makes you stumble. Jesus is the point of difference between the church and the world.

What else does Peter say about the church?

Let’s continue in verse 9.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **10**
Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

What an extraordinary description. The language is taken straight from God’s description of Israel in Exodus after he has rescued them from slavery in Egypt, as they stand at the foot of Mt Sinai.¹ Jesus fulfils Israel’s identity and vocation and in him we are given that identity. This is who God says the church is, in spite of its corruption, its sins, its failures of leadership, its seeming weakness. This is who God says we as St George’s are, with all our faults and frailties. This is why you can rest confident and secure, not in yourself or what you do, but because this is who God says you are in Christ. Living stones. A holy priesthood. A Chosen people. A royal priesthood. A holy nation. God’s special possession. Called out of darkness and into God’s wonderful light.

¹ Exodus 19.5-6

Notice that the church is not a racial, or ethnic, or linguistic or national group that you are born into. The West may have Christian heritage, but the church is not Western. No, the church has always been made up of people from different cultures and languages and nationalities. We don't have to give up or change our ethnic or cultural identity when we become Christians, but we see them, like everything else in light of the cross. To become part of the church we must be born again of water and Spirit, that outward physical sign of baptism which points to the inward, spiritual reality of new birth by the Holy Spirit.

And what is our job as the church? Peter tells us in verse 5: *to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*. He clarifies what this means in verse 9: *declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light*. This is what we have been called by God to do - to worship him. To praise him. That's why we sing in church. That's why we tell our friends and neighbours about Christ, because we want them to experience just how precious and good he is, even as we delight in him. Declaring God's praise is one side of worship, our spiritual sacrifice. The other side of worship is how we live, that is doing good to all, and that brings us to point 2.

2. Church towards Society - 11-17

In these verses Peter turns from who we are in relation to God, to who we are in relation to the world. God's call upon us, the new identity he gives us in Christ brings about a new relation to the society in which we're called, and a new way of living. Read with me verse 11.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

Here's that dual identity again. We are foreigners and exiles. We belong to the city of God and we live in the city of men. The call of the gospel of Christ upon our lives creates a distance even to our home culture. Theologian Miroslav Volf writes,

"Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). ... Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but a bursting out of the new precisely within the proper space of the old.

Because our the new birth in Christ we ask:

"Which beliefs and practices of the culture that is ours must we reject now that our self has been reconstituted by new birth? Which can we retain? What must we reshape to reflect better the values of God's new creation?"²

Notice that Peter does not say the society in which we live is our enemy against whom we must do battle, whether it is hostile or sympathetic. Rather our primary enemy is within. It is our "evil desires". We saw this back in chapter 1. This is that word, *epithumia*, or over desire. It's our fallen

² Miroslav Volf, 'Soft Difference', *Ex Auditu* 10(1995):15-30

condition where our desires are all out of order. Where, because we don't love God as our highest good, we love other good things in the wrong way or we love the wrong thing.

In his book *To Change the World*, James Davidson Hunter looks at 3 different ways the church in the US has tried to play its relationship with society. The first is cultural domination. Here the church has tried to get its people elected so that it can legislate a Christian worldview. This is the strategy of the Religious Right on the conservative side and also the strategy of progressives on the left. The second is cultural withdrawal. This is where the church tries to protect itself. We argue for religious freedom and try to carve out space for ourselves in a secular society. But to those outside the church this comes across as purely self serving. The third option is cultural assimilation, where the church tries to become like the culture around it and so loses its distinctiveness. There are outward religious trappings but there is little moral or spiritual difference between those inside and outside the church. Each of these approaches accents different aspects of the gospel. Cultural domination accents the objective truth of the Bible. Cultural withdrawal accents the fact that the gospel creates a distinction from the surrounding culture. Cultural assimilation majors on the fact that we're called to be all things to all people in order to save some. Hunter however argues that each of these fall short. Instead he suggests a model of **Faithful Presence**. Here the church is **faithful** to Christ as Lord and so looks different from the surrounding culture. On the other hand the church and us as Christians are **present** with our neighbours. We don't withdraw to protect ourselves. Because of the security we have in Christ we can go where he sends us and that is out in every corner of society to shine the light of Christ.

Faithful presence is what Jeremiah told the Jewish exiles in Babylon to be when he urged them to seek the good of the city. Faithful presence captures what Peter says is to be our relation to the society in which we find ourselves.

12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

We are to live good lives. To do good. To love our neighbours as ourselves. Peter here is just repeating Jesus' own teaching from the Sermon on the Mount that we read earlier.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

What does salt do? It preserves and gives flavour. That's how we do good as public disciples. In our workplaces and schools, families and communities. We can bring light where there is darkness, hope where there is despair. We do so with creativity and good humour, confidence and humility, secure in

who we are as children of God. This is my hope and prayer for you at St George's and I see it happening among you as you're sent out each week to shine Christ's light. I see it in people like Mike, serving on board like TasTafe, seeking to be guided by the 10 commandments. Or Karen, working as a speech pathologist, with a heart for the over 50% of Tasmanians who are functionally illiterate. Or Anthea and Matt, in positions of leadership training doctors in a dysfunctional health system. Or Sally or Siobhan or Janice, facing enormous challenges of disability, mental and physical ailments, persevering, trusting Jesus and being present to love your families and those who you meet each day. It is through our good deeds, through that faithful presence that we bear witness to Christ and commend him to the watching world, even if they accuse us of doing wrong.

Peter fleshes out what faithful presence, living good lives among the pagans, our neighbours, looks like in the rest of the letter. We've already seen that we declare God's praises and in chapter 3 Peter says, be prepared to give a reason for your hope. But for the moment let's briefly touch on what he says in verses 13-17. Peter tells us what our relationship is to be with the State. Verse 13

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, **14** or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

This is a snapshot of the political theology of the New Testament. Notice that Peter doesn't say "submit yourselves to righteous and godly human authorities". He says submit yourself to *every* human authority, from the supreme authority of the emperor, or for us the federal government, right down to state and local. Whether or not you agree with them. If Peter can say this for a pagan emperor, likely at whose command he was martyred, then how much more for us in a Western democratic nation. We respect and submit to authorities, *for the Lord's sake*, in obedience to Christ. Notice too that we are told what the fundamental job of government is: to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right. That is, to uphold justice. In common grace Christ exercises his providential care through the governments of this world.

Over the pandemic there has been a lot of talk about governments restricting people's freedoms. Peter has a word about freedom for us as Christians. Verse 16.

Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. It's not governments who ultimately give us freedom. It's Christ. The paradox of the Christian life is that it is in serving Christ that we are truly free. This is how we are to use our freedom - not for ourselves, but as Christ slaves, to serve others in love. That's what doing good looks like. That's what faithful presence looks like. What a travesty when Christians use their freedom in Christ to cover evil. When that happens, well, the prophet Ezekiel was right, God's name is blasphemed among the nations because of that kind of wickedness.

Finally, what does Peter here say doing good looks like? Verse 17.

Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor. Show proper respect to everyone.

God has called us out of darkness into light. He has made us a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. That is who we are as the church. That is our unshakeable security. We are citizens of heaven journeying through the city of men. What is to be our relation to the city, to our neighbours? How are we to conduct ourselves? We're called to faithful presence. To seek the good of the city. To be salt and light. To live good lives. To shine the light of Christ. To be public disciples of the Lord Jesus. To love our neighbours as ourselves. We do so after the pattern of the one who was a neighbour to us, even his enemies. We do so that our friends and neighbours may see our good deeds and, in God's mercy, praise our Father and glorify God on the day he visits us.