

Elect and Exiles

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

Date: 31 July 2022, 7th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 24:3-11; John 3:1-18; 1 Peter 1:1-12

It was late 1994 and I was about to go home. But far from being excited at the prospect I was in fact devastated. It was only as we got into the truck to leave that I realised that I might never see this place again. I begged my mother to stay. Hot tears welled up as we bounced down the dirt road. I cried the whole hour's drive into town, and every day for the rest of that week before we stepped on to the plane home. We were leaving Christian Leaders Training College (CLTC), a bible college in the highlands of PNG. I'd spent more than half my life there, and it was much more home than the "home" we were going back to in Australia.

My experience as a missionary kid was similar to many other "Third Culture Kids". You're always a foreigner where you grow up, but you're never quite at home in the country of your parents. Nearly everything about back home is a little odd: how people do things, what they eat, how they talk, the list goes on. And quite frankly for everyone else back home, you're a little odd. And so you're a Third Culture Kid – never quite at home in your host country, never quite at home in your home country.

Each of us have a longing to be home, truly home. We experience that longing when we're away from our usual support structures and familiarities, our homes. Many of us have experienced that, moving to Hobart from interstate and overseas. Moving to a new culture you can experience a sense of alienation, and you have to work out how to navigate the strange world around you. But that longing for home can also strike us when life is good, when work and family and friendships are going well and we're happy. It's at this point that the question, "Where is my home?" can be the most poignant – when things are good, where if not here? You might experience a sense of alienation, of not quite fitting in, in social circles, with the natural environment, maybe even in your own body. "Where is your home?" is one of the central questions in life. It's a question that shapes how you see yourself. It shapes how you make your way through the world, how you live, and what your hopes and dreams are.

This week we're starting a series on 1 Peter. I've called it ***Strangers and Neighbours: Being Christian in a Post Christian Society***. In the latest census the number of people in Australia identifying as Christian dropped below 50% for the first time. For the older among us, you

can remember a time when churches were full, and when the church was the respected moral guardian of society. Let me tell you that has not been the case in my living memory, nor for anyone younger than me. When I came back to Australia from PNG I went from a society where nearly everyone went to church to one in which people thought you were strange if you went to church. Today, many people don't just think Christianity is odd, they think it's evil. Some Christians fight to reclaim Australia as a "Christian" nation. That ship has long sailed, if we ever could have been called that.

1 Peter is a great letter for us to study because it teaches us how to be Christian in a society that is hostile, or at the very least has values and beliefs radically different from our own. If you're not a Christian, I'm so glad you're here, because studying this letter with us will help you understand what makes Christians different and help see where we're coming from. But also, because this letter has the spiritual resources to answer that deeper, universal human question, whether you're Christian or not, of how do we overcome that sense of alienation we all feel? How can we find our true home? And how do we live in the in between?

We're going to look at 2 points this morning, and you can see them there in the 1st verse of 1 Peter – point 1, **elect**, and point 2 **exiles**. We'll spend a bit more time on the first as that's where verses 3-12 focus, and the rest of the letter fleshes out the second.

Intro to letter

But first, a little orientation to the letter. The author is the apostle Peter, who was one of the leading figures in the early Christian movement, one of Jesus' closest disciples.

The people he wrote to were Christians scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, and so on – what is modern day Turkey. Peter wrote to these Christians to encourage them in their faith and hope in Christ and to teach them what obedience to Christ looks like, particularly in the face of persecution and suffering.

1. Elect

Peter begins his letter by naming his readers as **God's elect** and **exiles**. Immediately we see that Christian identity has a dual orientation – towards God and towards the world. To use a contemporary expression, Christian identity is intersectional. Peter expands what it means that to be God's elect, chosen by God in verse 2:

First, the choice is made according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. This was his decision before we had anything to do with it. It's not in response to what we bring to God. It's not because of our moral performance. It's sheer grace.

Second this choice is brought about in us through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Having been chosen, God's people are consecrated by the Spirit – set apart – that's what sanctify means. What are we set apart for? – two things, obedience to Christ and sprinkling with his blood. The first is our response to God's grace to us – obedience. The second, points to Christ's death. In our reading from Exodus 24, Moses sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the people with the words “this is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you.” And the people promised to obey all that God had commanded. The sprinkling of the blood unites both the sacrifice establishing relationship between God and the people, with their response of obedience. Here it is Jesus' blood that is sprinkled over the people, because through his sacrificial death for us that we are put in right relationship to God. Jesus' blood shed on the cross brings atonement and forgiveness. We respond with faith and obedience.

Notice that this new identity given by God is Trinitarian, chosen by the Father, sanctified through the Spirit, sprinkled with the blood of the Son. Sprinkling also evokes the baptismal rite – where the water symbolises the cleansing that Jesus' death brings – the washing clean from sin. Baptism too is a sign of new birth – dying to the old self; being reborn to live for God; being born into a new family, the church, the body of Christ. And this is where Peter goes in verse 3:

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, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Notice here that the new birth is into two things:

On the one hand, it is into a living hope. On the other, an inheritance. Let's consider these in turn.

What is it that you hope for? A successful career? Financial security? A retirement where you can live comfortably off the fruit of your labours? To see you children and grandchildren happy?

The teacher in Ecclesiastes writes,

The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong,

nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come¹

Death brings all our hopes to nothing. But in the face of this destroyer, Peter says there is hope in a champion who has fought this last great enemy and triumphed. There is hope beyond the grave in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Into this hope we are born.

Peter continues the image of new birth by looking to the day when these newborn infants will come of age and receive their inheritance. He pictures us as children awaiting the day when we inherit the family fortune.

I recently heard of one of the longest running court cases in history. It concerned the estate of the fabulous wealthy William Jennens. In 1798 he died without leaving a will and the dispute over his fortune remained unresolved and only ended in 1915, 117 years after his death when the money ran out.

Our inheritance is one that cannot be whittled away in legal fees. It will never be affected by a stock market crash, disaster or theft – it is more secure than houses, kept in heaven for us. The parent who keeps it for us is our Father, God himself – it is his fortune – beyond all that we can imagine. What's more, not only is our inheritance secure, we ourselves are also shielded by God's power as we trust in him.

This is our future hope. But Peter is also honest about the realities of the present life. We face suffering, grief and all kinds of trials. Verse 6:

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. **7** These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

The dominant narratives of our culture do not equip us to respond to suffering. We do all we can to avoid it, but we're not taught how to get through it or how it might actually bring us some good. Yet it's something we all face. Peter has lots to say about how to approach suffering. It's one of the big themes in this letter. But for the moment, what does he say? Suffering refines our faith. The image Peter uses is of smelting gold. You put gold in the furnace and all the impurities burn away. When it comes to faith, suffering burns away all

¹ Ecclesiastes 9.11-12

the false gods we can put our trust in - like money, or intellect, or ability, or beauty, or tribal allegiance, or sex, even just your smartphone. Suffering shows them to be weak and failing so that we put our trust and hope in Christ who alone can save. And as we find that he is the solid rock upon which we stand, we find our hearts run to him in love. Verse 8:

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, **9** for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Chosen by God. Set apart by the Holy Spirit. Sprinkled by the blood of Christ. Given new birth in a living hope with a secure inheritance. This is what God has done and will do. This is who we are as we trust in Christ. If our family, our inheritance, our hope is in Christ with God, that means we are not at home this side of glory. That brings us to point 2: Exiles.

2. Exiles

Remember back in verse 1, Peter speaks of dual identity, elect and exiles. The description, “exile” occurs again in 2.11 where Peter describes Christians as “foreigners and exiles.” The same words in Greek are translated in the 2011 NIV in Hebrews 11 as “foreigners and strangers”. They pick up on how Abraham describes himself in Genesis 23 when he wants to buy a plot of land in Canaan to bury his wife.² The words have the connotations of a pilgrim, a sojourner, a resident foreigner. In the 1st century world of Peter’s original audience, these were people who were citizens of one city living in another. The translation “exile” picks up on Israel’s experience of exile in Babylon, where the prophet Jeremiah encouraged them to settle over the generations, even though they had an identity and allegiance back home in Jerusalem. Being a “resident foreigner” is a little like my experience of living in Tassie. We’ve been here for nearly 10 years, but from a Tasmanian perspective, only my kids can say they’re Tasmanian, because they were born and grew up here. I never will be.

Hebrews 11 says that Abraham was “looking for a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.” He and the other heroes of the faith were “longing for a better country - a heavenly one.”³ This is Peter’s point: The new birth that Jesus gives also makes us sojourners, strangers even in our own culture.

Theologian Miroslav Volf puts it like this: “[This new birth] distances one from the old way of life, inherited from one’s ancestors (1:18) and transmitted by the culture at large—a way of life characterised by the lack of knowledge of God and by misguided desires (1:14).”⁴ He

² Genesis 23.4 “I am a foreigner and stranger among you.”

³ Hebrews 11.8-16

⁴ Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in 1 Peter”, *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 15-30.

continues, “In the midst of the world in which they live, [Christians] are given a new home that comes from God's future. The new birth commences a journey to this home.”

Being on the journey to this new home is to have a direct impact on how we live in the present. Peter will spend the rest of the letter exploring what this looks like, but for the moment let's stick to what he says in verse 2. To be chosen by God is to be called to obedience to Christ, and this will necessarily mean being a stranger even in your home-town. Put another way, as Christian we should live lives that are different from our neighbours. Don't be surprised when you stick out as a Christian. Are you prepared for that? Are you preparing your kids to stick out? Who you are and your hope is not in what others say or think about you. It's in Christ. And if your life looks pretty much the same as everyone else around you, except you occasionally show up to church on a Sunday, perhaps you need to ask yourself, “am I actually living in obedience to Christ?”

All of us experience alienation in this life. We long to be truly home. The good news, whether you're Christian or not is this: Jesus Christ left all the comforts of his eternal home in his Father's house. He came to this earth as a stranger and entered into our cosmic alienation. He was rejected by society, by his family and closest friends. He was cast out and died outside the city, so that we might be brought in to live in his eternal home as God's daughters and sons. That is our true home. No wonder Peter's joy bursts off the page when he writes, *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.* Will you praise God for his mercy and find your true home in Christ?