

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

John 17:1-11

1 After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.

2 For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.

3 Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

4 I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.

5 And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

6 "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.

7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.

8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.

10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.

11 I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

The only true God

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

I must admit so many bible texts seem to be topical at the moment, which I suppose is unsurprising, but this one from 1 Peter in particular made me particularly sit up and take notice, especially when it got to the bit where it says Be Alert!

I think Peter at least was clear about what it meant.

But also this:

Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

To me at least our situation is definitely strange. Now lockdown has eased a little, people are mostly friendly even when they're skirting widely around you, but there are others who look at you a bit suspiciously. When you're preaching from texts which encourage the opposite of social isolation, it's difficult to know where to start with this. **Fear** drives us apart, and we find comfort in the seeming safety of our homes.

It's quite tempting just to stop going out if you don't ever need to. But life isn't risk free.

So we have to try to keep things in perspective.

The churches Peter is writing to were living with risk, in **fear** of persecution. But they're encouraged to rejoice!

To rejoice because Jesus suffered exactly what they were suffering. Now I can't say I'm suffering, but many are.

Although not directly for Christ, as the recipients of Peter's letter are. So how are we supposed to rejoice?

We have to see what God has to say to us.

Firstly we have to be clear about the reality.

Jesus in our reading from John is praying for the disciples, knowing that the next day he will be tortured to death, so this prayer is coming from a place of extreme risk and fear. And he felt that fear, because he was, and is, a human being like us. He's not changed into something else. Today, Ascension Sunday, we celebrate his return to the Father. [Somebody cracked a joke this week that He's now working from home]. But He is still a human being. God incarnate as a human being. With a resurrected body. And gone to where we will go. *I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. John 14:2*

In Jerusalem 33 AD Jesus was at risk. Not just from those who opposed his whole existence. At risk, as Peter says, from *the devil who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*. There is massive opposition to Jesus now in the world, the power of evil is a reality, and it is often wielded in the hands of the powerful and financially influential. **Satan is the father of fear**, lies, deception and destruction, and the source of disease.

History teaches us that governments are far from pure in their motives, but governments are of course only part of the problem.

Some parts of the church will say Christians are immune to this but Peter contradicts that by saying we must be alert and resist. Jesus taught (John 12:31) that the prince of this world is Satan. If there is a prince there is a King and that is Jesus. When Peter himself tried to stop Jesus from going to his death, Jesus said to him, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God...."* Mt 16:23. And so the teaching of the New Testament is that until Jesus returns, Satan has a measure of power in the world. His very actions brought Jesus to the cross, his very actions caused his own downfall, because it was at the cross that Satan was defeated. This is clear if we have eyes to see.

Our own actions at times work against the Kingdom.

This is why we must be alert and listening to God. Especially now. It's very disturbing to me that literally the whole world is in retreat from a virus, and that the economic system, bad enough before, is on the brink of collapse. The figures on this are frightening, for the majority who are not rich. And the after effects will be more widespread than the virus itself. This is all without the news which is still going on below the all encompassing covid headlines, of wars in Syria and Yemen, the threat of famine, and the climate change issues, among many other things not attracting our attention at the moment. These are people whose lives were desperate before the pandemic. We don't like to think about it.

So fear is the driving force behind all of this.

What does Peter have to say to us?

Remember he's speaking specifically to those Christians who were in fear of being persecuted by an all powerful Roman Empire whose god was the Emperor. In the UK we are not being persecuted for our faith, although many are in other parts of the world. But we are suffering in different ways, if not physically then mentally and emotionally. In verse 6 he says this:

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

This reinforces our need not to be fearful. We worship a God who ultimately holds all the power, unlike the 'emperors' of our own time. But he offers us a free choice as to how we respond, as a society, and as individuals. We can turn back to Him.

And we will be lifted up, blessed, in due time.

This is the promise. Be patient.

7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

This accepts that we have anxiety. Jesus teaches us not to worry, (Matt 6:34) and I've heard it taught that worry is a sin, and it may be, but if so 99.99% of people are guilty!

Actually he says don't worry about tomorrow. So you're OK to worry about today! But Peter says to hand it over, let go of it. Or pray that he will take it. And Jesus promises to take our burdens on himself, if we allow it. Not if we persist in fear.

8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around

like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. The Greek word here translated as Be alert, can also mean 'watch'. The watcher is also a prophetic voice, so the watcher can be a speaker of truth and encouragement. But it's also about being aware of the reality of what the world is like. Much as many people, even some Christians, will tell you Satan does not exist, the Bible says otherwise, and even if you are uncomfortable with it being personalised, evil is real. But we also know that since the resurrection of Jesus, Satan is a defeated enemy.

We each have a conscience and we can resist what we know to be wrong. Or the enemy will devour us. Another translation for 'devour' is 'consume', so we might be consumed by fear, but we're given the strength to resist by our faith. Verse 10 **the God of all grace**, *who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.* Here is the good news. The opposite of fear is love. The God we put our faith in is love. So there is really no contest. We must be steadfast in belief, and it is God who *makes* us steadfast. Jesus prays this: *Glorify your Son... 2 For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. 3 Now this **is** eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

That's why we **can** rejoice, that in the face of any trial, we know and are loved by the only true God. Amen