

"The authors of this commentary have produced a volume that is a pleasure to commend. I invite you to join them on a journey that re-orientates us towards persevering hope, a loving holiness and Christ exalting joy."

The Rt Revd & Rt Hon Sarah Mullally DBE, Bishop of London

1 Peter is a significant letter, seen by many scholars to be an ecumenical bridge and anchor. It is first and foremost about the transformative joy of faith in Jesus Christ.

This commentary offers a close reading of the text from beginning to end, drawing on a multiplicity of voices and engaging in a number of foundational themes for the Christian community according to the apostolic author: hope, holiness, suffering, joy, hospitality, exile, resurrection, leadership. Tackling the themes raised by the epistle including slavery, exile and refugees, patriarchy, hierarchy, oppression, gender justice, and the risk of hospitality, the book engages with these topics not only through commentary, but also through short excurses which draw the reader more deeply into some of the difficult questions.

Designed as the official commentary resource for the **Lambeth 2020 Conference**, and structured around the themes of the conference, the book offers a unique range of perspectives on an oft-overlooked epistle. With contributions from an impressive range of contributors including **Paula Gooder, Paul Swarup, Craig Keener, Isabelle Hamley** and **Emma Ineson**, it will provide an important resource for anyone studying, teaching, or preaching from the letter.

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The First Letter of Peter

Edited by Jennifer Strawbridge



**LAMBETH
CONFERENCE**



The First Letter of Peter

A Global Commentary

Edited by
Jennifer Strawbridge



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Foreword

*by the Most Revd Justin Welby,
Archbishop of Canterbury*

Scripture reveals divine truth and thus changes people. In all its remarkable diversity it penetrates deep into the heart of readers and their societies. Peter's First Letter will change people, as it has always transformed those who have read it. They have found that it has spoken to their experience of Christian life and community. They have struggled with its ideas, argued with its content – not least on the roles of men, women and slaves, as well as attitudes to government. Above all, people have quoted it: 'love covers a multitude of sins' and 'the word of the Lord endures for ever'.

Peter addresses a people who are suffering or fearing that they will suffer for their faith. He points them towards God's view of the dramatic, earth-shaking, soul-transforming change that comes through following Christ; to the before and after of conversion, to hope that gives resilience, and to the consequences of being God's holy people. Following Christ is not a passive and private affair, to be conducted in secrecy and shame, but a call of all to mutual love, unity of spirit, compassion, and above all to give glory to Christ and draw people to faith, despite difference and suffering. Christians, Peter tells us, should be different; exiles and strangers marked apart by hope,

by holiness, by their love for their neighbour, one another and Jesus Christ.

Peter grounds this vision of what it means to suffer for Christ, and to be an alien and exile in this world, in his focus on the 'then' and the 'now'. The theme of then and now is found in the shift from division to reconciliation, from anxiety to humility, from death to life. Once you were not a people, Peter writes, but now you are God's people (1 Peter 2.10). The message of 1 Peter is clear: 'God has created us, changed us, and transformed us into His own people so that as we declare the wonderful works of Him who brought us out of darkness into His marvellous light' (2.9). We too can be instruments of transformation in the world around us.

Living as God's people has consequences for God's church, for our behaviour both towards one another and towards God's world. No church is obedient to God if it focuses only on itself; the focus must be on its mission. The Church must look outward, must engage those who are alien and strange to us, and must be made up of what Peter calls 'living stones', stones that are alive, changed by contact with one another and above all by the work of the Spirit.

The First Letter of Peter is a text for a global church engaging with diversity of culture and attitudes in a twenty-first century that makes possible communication without true relationship. It speaks just as clearly to what it means to be a Christian today as it did to Christians in the first century. It is a letter that, as you will see in what follows, deals with issues of persecution and suffering, of exile and alienation. It is a letter that emphasizes themes of holiness, hope and prayer, with a call to reconciliation

and confident witness to the world around us. It is a letter that instructs the people of God that they must seek to live and to lead in a way that shows others that they are God's people, under the authority of Scripture, faithful to Christ and inspired by the Spirit.

It is my hope and prayer that we might be challenged to consider the questions that 1 Peter asks of all of us together as a people of God. As we seek to know better Christ who understands intimately our suffering, our alienation and our division through the agony of his crucifixion, I hope that those at the Lambeth Conference 2020, as well as Christians around the world, will know ever better the loving power, the reconciliation and the salvation that arises through his resurrection. Peter will draw our eyes firmly to Jesus, and to the joy and hope we find in the revelation of his love for us. It should also send us out as God's church for God's world, a church united, but not unanimous.

This commentary emerges from a group of people, drawn together from across the Anglican Communion and global church, who sought the guidance of the Spirit, wrestled with the Scriptures, and opened themselves to seeing how others encounter the First Letter of Peter. In their openness, honesty and prayer, they sought to strip away the crust of piety so that the Scripture could confront them. They listened to the wisdom of the church through the ages, and to the wisdom of the church throughout the world. The fruit of their work invites others, and invites you, into this same task. You are invited in this commentary to be confronted by Scripture, to lift your vision outward, and to see that God is calling you and your community as God's new people to the business of

changing the world and bringing the transforming love of Jesus Christ across the globe.

The Most Revd Justin Welby
Archbishop of Canterbury

Introduction to the Commentary

The transforming joy of Jesus Christ changes lives and communities. The First Letter of Peter is written to communities across Asia Minor who, sanctified by the Spirit, are called to witness to this transforming joy even as they suffer for the name of Christ. Written to a persecuted community, 1 Peter speaks of the struggle of early followers of Jesus to maintain their mission and sense of cohesion in the face of opposition (Elliott 1992, p. 274). The letter offers encouragement for unity over division and for humility over anxiety as it instructs those suffering for their faith in how to live faithfully in the time between Jesus' death and resurrection and his return. It addresses and encourages all who follow Christ, while also engaging specific issues faced by those members of the community who are enslaved, those who are exiles and resident aliens, those who live under human institutions of hierarchy and patriarchy and all who are called to welcome and love the stranger. Across the chapters of 1 Peter, the driving message for all is the transforming joy of faith in Jesus Christ and a call to witness, to hope and to holiness as God's chosen people.

This commentary draws together numerous voices from across the global church in preparation for the Lambeth Conference 2020, the gathering of all Anglican bishops from across the Anglican Communion that takes place once every 10–12 years. Over the course of five days and two meetings in London as well as countless emails and

correspondence, faithful scholars from around the world gathered together for the St Augustine Seminar to spend time with 1 Peter and to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their engagement with Scripture. This commentary draws on the stories, struggles and prayers of scholars from six continents and represents a range of Christian traditions and experiences. The work from these gatherings is drawn together in what follows, where different approaches to Scripture are brought together in such a way that difference is not hidden, and the conversation continues. Our hope and prayer is that this commentary invites you and your community to continue this conversation and to experience the transforming love of Christ proclaimed in 1 Peter.

The tone of the commentary is intentionally conversational and even homiletical in places, offering a close reading of 1 Peter and drawing out a number of foundational themes for the Christian community as set forth by its apostolic author: hope, holiness, witness, suffering, joy, hospitality, exile, leadership, resurrection. Across this commentary these themes emerge time and again, with short excursions woven into each chapter to engage more deeply with the themes and with the text. The five chapters of the commentary mirror the five chapters of 1 Peter, though detailed notes are given in Chapters 2 and 3 for why the chapter divisions of 1 Peter (added after the letter was composed) are not always helpful. This is especially the case in 1 Peter 2 and 3, where the call to various sectors of the Church to 'accept the authority of' (2.13, 18; 3.1) belong together as Peter engages with what it means to acknowledge authority, to submit, to honour and how to return good for evil as a

pattern that instructs all Christians in conformity to Christ.

The letter is written to those who are experiencing alienation and suffering. Nevertheless, the people addressed have not been forcibly displaced but rather are part of the diaspora because they have been called into communion by God and are therefore separated from the world, and sometimes from their own social or political communities. This focus leads to a number of interpretations of the text – as the St Augustine Seminar encountered on a small scale – since some will immediately identify with the context of persecution and suffering, and others will not. Importantly, we cannot interpret someone else's suffering for them. Peter's letter not only offers encouragement for those living in difficult times, but also calls others to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and not in judgement. The letter makes clear that those who are vulnerable don't always have the luxury of resisting oppression or stepping away from suffering, continually returning to the person of Christ and his rejection, unjust suffering and exaltation.

Themes of hope and of holiness are as central to this letter as those of suffering and offer mechanisms for remaining resilient in the face of suffering and, at times, resisting oppressive systems. This move can be found clearly in the strong outsider-insider language found in 1 Peter, where those who call themselves 'Christian' are considered both exiles and aliens, as well as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God's own people (2.9). The identity of exiles, of those excluded, of those who are suffering, as God's chosen people is subversive. God chose those who were homeless, those

who did not belong, those who were deemed outsiders and strangers and made them God's own people, called to holiness. Thus, the text offers hope for those in ambiguous, difficult situations.

Reorientation as God's chosen, holy people doesn't necessarily lead to an escape from suffering, but it does mean that the powers that tried to control, that tried to dominate through fear, can no longer determine who and whose we are. Such a shift is modelled on Christ himself, the suffering servant (as 1 Peter, a letter deeply conversant with Hebrew scriptures, is clear). Hope comes not from the activities, postures or identities we generate on our own, it comes from our following Christ and participation in what God in Christ has initiated.

Accompanying this hope is an unfolding theology of holiness throughout 1 Peter which points to a faith that is dynamic and is deeply connected with the profound holiness of God into which readers are invited (Be holy for God is holy; 1 Peter 1.16). In the context of holiness and suffering, both of which are connected to God in Christ, 1 Peter raises issues for the Church today about how we engage with difference. Most significantly for those who are in communion with Christ, 1 Peter challenges all to reflect on the way we treat each other today and the way we have treated one another in the past. It calls for a transformed behaviour towards each other and the world, one which is focused more on coming together (being built up together as living stones; 1 Peter 2.4–5) than on disagreement. Living a life that is holy is not simply abstention from what is bad, but an imitation of God in the self-sacrificial movement towards the other, imitating God's movement towards us. And thus, 1 Peter

speaks of redemption in the midst of conflict and the actions we are called to embody in our world in love.

Within this context, reading 1 Peter opens up a number of challenges for the Church today which are expanded upon throughout this commentary. Such challenges, which can inform our prayer and conversations, include:

- 1 Peter is written to a people who are a minority, scattered in the world, which is an identity that characterizes the Christian life for the apostolic author and his readers: does this identity characterize the Christian life and mission for us today?
- As a letter addressed to people who are powerless, suffering and in situations where they have little choice, what does it mean to do right in those situations? What does it mean to imitate Christ in those situations?
- 1 Peter calls its readers to sanctify Christ as Lord (1 Peter 3.15), not the government (the emperor), not the master, not the husband. These three are introduced as ruling powers embedded within the ancient world, but 1 Peter asks: what might it look like if Jesus is Lord and not the emperor, master, husband?
- Power imbalances are real in 1 Peter and the world today and misuses of power are dangerous, especially when those in power are not always aware they are misusing it. This letter challenges abuse of power – cutting across place and titles, and including abuses that are physical, sexual, economic, authoritarian. Where have inequalities of power led to abuses in the past? Where do they continue to do so and how might all who exercise leadership and welcome continuously

reflect on the power they hold?

- Knowing that fear can all too easily corrupt life together in Christ and imprison or further alienate individuals and peoples, what does it mean for a community of believers to live in hope and not in fear?
- One of the central challenges of the letter can be found in 1 Peter 3.15–16: how might you be ‘ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you’? What does it look like to live in a way that prompts such questions about Christian hope?
- When making a defence of hope in us, we must ask: what is the Church known for? In many parts of the world it is known for abuse, for infighting, or for disagreements about sexuality. Where is the Church glorifying God? What is the account that the Church and followers of Jesus give for their hope and faith?
- The letter ends with a call to leadership, with Peter including himself among those who are elders in the Church, shepherding a given flock. Such images suggest that openness, fluidity, creativity cannot be detached from the suffering of God’s people and the glory that is to come. Where has our ministry lost creativity, openness and connection to those most vulnerable? Where is our ministry most creative and open to exploring new fields and pastures?

In the midst of these challenges, the call to holiness and to conform to Christ found throughout 1 Peter remains. And such a call forms the foundation for seeing this letter as a tapestry, where holiness and following Christ are woven together with joy, suffering, hope, witness and

redemption, which we hope you will find in what follows.

This commentary makes up part of the preparatory materials for the Lambeth Conference 2020. However, it is intended for all those who wish to engage in deeper biblical study of 1 Peter, as individuals and as a community. The voices within this commentary are many, emerging from days of dialogue and prayer together in November 2018 and May 2019. Immense gratitude is due to the St Augustine's Foundation – a registered charity that provides grants to support the work of theological education across the Anglican Communion – whose generous grant enabled the preparatory gatherings and production of these materials.

One of the great glories of the Anglican Communion – indeed, of the global church – is that we are sisters and brothers of different ages and backgrounds, spread across so many cultures and contexts. This brings great strength, but also means it is easy for us to misunderstand each other, often not because we are saying something different but because we say it in a different way. We found this at the St Augustine Seminar – we had to listen carefully to each other, to hear each other's valuable insights when expressed in unfamiliar language. We expect that every reader will be disturbed at times by this book, as they read exegesis and interpretation which expresses an unfamiliar or even an unwelcome perspective. At those times, we would encourage you not to get frustrated or angry, but to pray that God would give you wisdom, insight and peace. Often God uses the stranger to reveal himself, his love and his purposes to us. As you encounter the text of 1

Peter, we pray that you may do so with a spirit of curiosity and openness as you seek to discover what the Holy Spirit might say and speak to you through this Scripture.

Introduction to 1 Peter

The First Letter of Peter presents itself as a letter written by 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ' (1.1). The letter portrays its apostolic author in Rome (called Babylon in this letter) and writing in the company of Mark and Silvanus (5.12–13), either or both of whom might be his assistant or indeed ghostwriter. Regardless of authorship 1 Peter is, in subtle but significant respects, deliberately cast in character (Bockmuehl 2012b, pp.142–7).

1 Peter is both embedded in the early Christian movement and deeply conversant with the Hebrew scriptures (for example, 1.24; 2.6–10; 3.10–12), drawing on a number of Jewish and Christian themes and texts. As such, it is understood by scholars to be an ecumenical bridge and anchor. It is called a 'catholic epistle', where catholic means 'universal' since it is addressed to more than one community (which is essential to keep in mind when this commentary speaks of Peter's 'community'). The letter is also connected with more strands of the New Testament than any other letter within it. Jesus' life and death in 1 Peter resonates with that in the Synoptic tradition (Mark, Matthew and Luke), and elements of this letter echo the writings of the apostle Paul.

The letter is written to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, all provinces of the Roman Empire in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and the prescript hints at a prior mission to northern Asia Minor

(1.1). These areas are associated with persecution of Christians both here in 1 Peter and in the correspondence in AD 112 of Pliny the Younger with the Emperor Trajan (*Letter* 10.96). The readership is a Christian diaspora – a group of people alienated from the society around them – whom we know to have experienced opposition specifically for their Christian faith and identity (4.12–17). They are suffering as rejected outsiders in their own communities, no longer belonging to a world in which they were once at home (4.1–5). The letter uses a number of powerful metaphors often translated as ‘resident alien’, ‘exile’, ‘stranger’, ‘foreigner’ and ‘sojourner’. This is the context into which Peter speaks his strikingly resonant message of hope and holiness, beginning in the first chapter.

Hope in the midst of persecution is clearly and repeatedly developed as that which unites the readers both with the apostle and with Jesus himself. The description of Jesus’ exemplary suffering, including his silence when unjustly abused in his trial (2.23–24), links with the depiction of the death of Jesus in Synoptic tradition (see Mark 10.45; 14.61; Matt. 20.28) as well as several of Peter’s speeches in Acts (see Acts 4.10–12; 10.42–43). Within 1 Peter, the apostolic author encourages Christian leaders as a ‘fellow elder’ and apostolic ‘witness’ of Jesus’ sufferings (5.1).

1

Called into Hope and Holiness in Christ¹ (1 Peter 1)



'Life is Short' (2010), Nancy Rourke.

'Life is Short': 1 Peter is addressed 'to the exiles of the Dispersion' (1.1). The word 'exile' contains echoes of outsider, the odd one out, someone who is different. In the deaf resistance art of Nancy Rourke, the figure in a different shade and with a smile (the only one in colour in the original) represents a deaf person who has discovered sign language

¹ The artwork and accompanying descriptions throughout this commentary were prepared by Hannah Lewis.

and the freedom that brings. This is in contrast to other deaf people in the painting who are restricted by the limits of having to try and communicate only by speaking and lip-reading. The smile on the signing figure, as well as its being painted in a different colour, shows the joy of being free to communicate in their own language. Similarly, the aliens and exiles of 1 Peter are being encouraged to find joy and freedom in their identity in Christ. When we become aware that, because of our faith, we are the odd one out in our own cultural context, do we beam with this freedom?

Nancy Rourke, deaf artist, used by permission; the coloured version can be accessed at www.nancyrourke.com/paintings/deaf/lifeisshort.jpg.

The first chapter of 1 Peter sets the tone for the whole of the letter. From the first verse we are told that the letter is from 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ' (1.1) and is written to 'exiles' who are spread throughout Asia Minor. The identity of these dispersed exiles is not limited to their geographical situation and dislocation, but immediately they are identified as 'chosen', 'destined' and 'sanctified' by Jesus Christ (1.2). This identity is crucial to the whole of the letter and for the apostolic author's understanding of God, for God the Father has chosen these exiles as God's own, the Spirit has made these exiles holy and they are called to obey Jesus Christ.

The first chapter builds on this new identity in Jesus Christ through six themes that run across the letter. **Diaspora and living as resident aliens** is the first theme for these are the ones who make up the community of 1 Peter. They are called 'strangers in the world', exiles or resident aliens (1.1, 17) who are experiencing or have experienced persecution. This context will form the basis

for the call not only to hope, holiness and joy, but also to hospitality, risk, witness, resistance and resilience. **Hope** is the second theme, whose foundation is Jesus Christ. Hope in Christ is not the same as optimism, for only hope can confront death and despair because this hope is based on the death and resurrection of Christ and not on our own doings or personal piety. This leads straight into the third theme, that of **rebirth and resurrection**. The movement from death to life (1.3) is connected to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1.19–20) and to the calling as God's own people (1.22–23). This rebirth through the living word of God moves one from no hope to hope (1.21), from ignorance to knowledge (1.14), from disobedience to obedience (1.2, 22).

Peter's letter is addressed to those who are suffering. Difficult as it may sound, the apostolic call is to rejoice in the midst of suffering and testing (1.6) and to know **Christ's joy in the midst of suffering**. With the focus on Christ, those who are suffering now are assured of the work of God to bring new life in which the past is forgiven, the present protected and the future assured (1.3–5, 7). The joy of Christ is thus shared even when he is not seen (1.8), and his suffering and glory is the example and encouragement to these dispersed Christians (1.11).

Christ's self-sacrifice and suffering also informs the fifth theme, which is the **call to holiness** of those who bear the name 'Christian'. This is a call to imitate God in God's self-sacrificial movement towards the other and towards us. God is holy and so we too are called to be holy (1.15–16). This holiness is not something that we can earn or control, but is an invitation and a gift, which leads to the final theme of 1 Peter: **inheritance and God's gift**.

God's gifts are better than gold or silver (1.18) and can never perish, spoil, or fade (1.4). And while holiness, hope and being chosen as God's own people are all gifts from God, the ultimate gift described within 1 Peter is that of salvation (1.5, 9, 10).

1 Peter 1.1–2

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²who 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:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

1 Peter is a general letter sent to Christians dispersed in the Roman provinces or regions of Asia Minor. These are places in the Roman Empire that are known for their faith, but many of them are places to which Paul did not travel in his missionary journeys (see Acts 16.7). The very first word of the letter makes clear that it is attributed to the apostle Peter. As suggested in the earlier introduction, scholars debate whether Peter could have written it directly because of its sophisticated Greek syntax. The letter's contents also suggest that it was written towards the end of the first century (Bartlett, p. 234). Thus, some advocate that it was written after Peter's death perhaps

by a ghostwriter such as Mark or Silvanus (mentioned in 1 Peter 5). Whether the letter was written by Peter or some other early Christian leader, the letter is deliberately cast in the character of Peter and written by an author who lived in diaspora in the imperial centre of Rome to colonial subjects living in Asia Minor.

Asia Minor had been colonized for centuries and was influenced by Hellenistic language and culture, as well as Roman imperial commerce and religion (Schüssler Fiorenza, p. 383). The recipients of the letter are characterized as exiles, migrants, foreigners and resident aliens (1.1; 2.11). It is worth noting, in this Roman context, that there are two meanings of the word 'exile' in the opening of the letter. First, in its immediate context, 'exile' means that the Christians who received the letter had left their homeland to live as strangers and foreigners in Asia Minor. In this sense, the word establishes a connection between the sender and the recipients as they are both living in exile, in diaspora. Second, 'exile' may also mean that all Christians no matter their political or geographical context are living in exile, separated for a time from their eternal home in heaven (Bartlett, p. 246).

The language of 'exile' and 'dispersion' or diaspora in the opening sentence of 1 Peter is key as it draws on well-known images and experiences from the Old Testament, where Israel was scattered like sheep as resident aliens in a foreign land. This is also an image picked up later in 1 Peter 2 and 5, where Peter draws on Ezekiel 34 and Gospel stories such as Luke 15, with God and Christ as a shepherd looking for scattered, lost sheep.

Those who are exiles, separated from their home, are

outsiders and often reviled. Resident aliens did not have full citizenship and did not enjoy the protection and rights that they once did in their homeland. They were politically and economically exploited and vulnerable, and often had to endure disdain and suspicion by those who were citizens. They could not hold major civic offices and were restricted in commerce, intermarriage and land tenure. However, they were still responsible for taxes and military services. Their status was not very different from foreigners and migrants (Elliott 1990, p. 26; Schüssler Fiorenza, p. 386). Their condition could be compared to Jewish exiles who did not live in their homeland and were treated as second-class citizens.

Therefore, from the beginning we see that the recipients of 1 Peter suffered from rejection and harassment by members of society because they lived as strangers in a foreign land and their Christian identity made them suspect. They were once pagans, following the religious and social practices of their ancestors (1.18), but they have become Christians, chosen by God and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (1.2). And this is the focus of the consolation and encouragement to the recipients of this letter. In the world, their sharing in the name of Christ may lead to suffering, but they are chosen, destined, belonging to a new people and protected by the power of God (1.3–5).

The letter exhorts Christians living in diaspora to put their faith in God and not lose hope in an environment of suspicion and hostility. As minorities in a colonized world, they had to show how living as a Christian community was different while, at the same time, they needed to bear witness that their Christian way of living did not present a threat to society. One of the challenges of 1 Peter is how

it expresses truth and encouragement to those who are persecuted and who live in danger because of their faith. It is difficult for those who are not persecuted to understand the reality of the recipients of this letter and there is much potential for disconnect and judgement.

1 Peter is highly relevant today, as the twenty-first century has been called 'the century of migration'. The letter touches on the themes of exile, diaspora, migration, interreligious relationships, living as minorities, second-class citizenship, gender relations and relationships to authorities. The strategies the letter offers to the suffering Christians in Asia Minor may not be applicable to all Christians living in different parts of the world today. Yet, it offers a mirror for us to examine power dynamics both in the public and domestic sphere.

Excursus: Home and Homelessness

¹ Peter is addressed to Gentile converts who find themselves rootless because of their new affiliation. They are now 'exiles of the Dispersion' (1.1) and 'aliens' (2.11). Discontented or no longer welcome in their original homes, they have become homeless. Yet the letter balances titles of dispossession and instability with images of possession and stability. Believers are now living stones in a new building, a 'spiritual house' (2.5). They now share the inheritance of God's people Israel ('a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation', 2.9; see also Ex. 19.6). Those who appeared to be without a home now find a common home in the 'house' or 'household of God' (4.17).

1 Peter 1.3–5

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be

revealed in the last time.

As the opening to 1 Peter continues, hope remains central not as something that we deserve, but as something that we are given. The letter describes two gifts, given through God's great mercy: a 'new birth' into 'living hope' ('living' is an adjective Peter is especially fond of) and a heavenly inheritance. The first gift of 'living hope' is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The second gift is a heavenly inheritance which is described as 'imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (1.4). This heavenly inheritance is connected to the promise of salvation, already achieved by Christ and 'ready to be revealed'.

Hope cannot be separated from the life that Jesus offers in his death and resurrection. It is not based on wishful thinking, fantasy, hyperbole, or any propaganda promoted by the empire or those pretending to have God's authority. Neither does such hope ever reduce to mere optimism, as if it were like a secular 'hope' for good weather or the success of one's football team. It is instead secure and anchored in God. This is the biblical mark of hope; it is always characterized by God's assured redemptive future already reaching out towards us, yet never in our grasp by skill or power (see Bockmuehl 2012a).

Faithful hope, living hope, is thus refined and strengthened, rather than subverted, by the experience of

trials and suffering. Such refinement and testing of hope is sustained through the believers' love for Jesus Christ, being filled with 'indescribable and glorious joy' at the assured outcome of faith in the salvation 'ready to be revealed'. And this assured outcome of faith in salvation is the promise found in 1 Peter 1.4 of the inheritance 'kept in heaven for you'. The word 'kept' makes clear this is not something an individual can do or achieve but that God is the one who reserves the inheritance for believers. Peter emphasizes the security and certainty of the reward awaiting his community.

The promise of 'new birth' in 1.3 means being part of a new family and therefore a new citizenship that bestows greater benefits than anything Rome or any power doing its bidding can offer. It also means victory over any power that opposes God. Because of rebirth through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the community of 1 Peter is offered the possibility of new beginnings, new possibilities and transformation for them not just as individuals but as communities of people who follow Jesus Christ. The message of hope to all is that we are not bound by our present circumstances, challenges and troubles.

There is, therefore, a glorious promise in 1 Peter 1.5 for those who call themselves 'Christian'. God's power may not shield believers from trials and sufferings, but it does protect them from that which would cause them to fall away. God's power protects because God's power is the means by which faith is sustained. The ultimate reason for preservation must be God's gift rather than any individual act of faith since otherwise the reference to God's power is unnecessary. Its function is to encourage

believers with the truth that God will preserve their faith through sufferings and the changes of life. Faith and hope are ultimately gifts of God, and Peter is clear that God promises to fortify believers – to protect those whose hope is in God – so that they persist in faith and hope until the day that they obtain the promised inheritance.

1 Peter 1.6–12

⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, ¹¹inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit

sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look!

The letter continues to build on the connection between hope, inheritance, salvation and Christ, whom the readers may not have seen, but they nevertheless love him, believe in him and rejoice with him. Christian hope is closely patterned on the experience of Jesus himself: his suffering and death (1.19; 2.21), but equally his resurrection (1.21) and exaltation (3.21). This logic of a union with Christ in hope and holy discipleship defines and structures our new birth and new behaviour (Achte-meier, p. 66). New birth to living hope in Christ alters our ‘patriotic’ allegiances as well: formerly enfranchised and at home in the world (1.14; 4.4), our true home in God now makes us exiled and alienated from secular society’s social, moral and spiritual loyalties (1.1, 17; 2.11). Such alienation is at times necessarily uncomfortable: its witness entails suffering, opposition and rejection by contemporaries who prize these loyalties we have left behind – again compared to the witness of Jesus (1.6; 2.18–20; 3.14, 17; 4.12; see Elliott 2000, p. 314).

The significant words in this section of the letter, which some may be surprised to find together, are ‘joy’, ‘good news’ and ‘suffering’. The word for ‘good news’ is the same as that for ‘gospel’ and occurs twice in this chapter, once in this section and once at the end. Peter ensures his community knows that all of his letter is good news ‘announced to you’ (1.25). Moreover, Peter offers what

he sees as a summary of the gospel, which leads to nothing less than the 'salvation of your souls' (1.9). This promise of salvation is connected by Peter to the salvation history of all God's people, beginning with the prophets who also 'testified in advance' to the promise of salvation and 'prophesied of the grace that was to be made yours' (1.11, 10). Similar to the Gospels in some ways, Peter seeks to find fulfilment of all of the scriptures, including the prophets, in Christ (see Keener 2013).

This proclamation of God's promise of salvation is immediately linked by Peter to essential elements of faith, namely joy, love and believing. Peter teaches, in line with many other teachers in Scripture, that faith is not something necessarily seen, but is deeply connected to love and joy. And both love and joy remind the reader that even while they have to 'suffer various trials' they are part of something greater than they can see and such suffering is not eternal ('for a little while'; 1.6). By connecting his community both to the prophets and the way God has acted in the past, and to the future and the promises of heaven (1.12), Peter seeks to comfort and to empower those who are suffering. Peter calls those who are suffering to faith, hope and joy, even as at times they struggle to survive.

Hope and joy, therefore, are deeply connected to the reality that those who follow Christ and suffer for Christ are part of something larger, which goes beyond the immediate. And thus, in a sense, Christian mission is not simply about individual joy and individual hope, but the witness of joy and hope in the midst of struggle, suffering and even persecution. We remember that this letter is written to those who are living scattered in the world as

a minority in their culture. In this context, the good news is proclaimed, raising the question for Christians both then and now about what the Spirit is doing in the Church, scattered around the world and in some places hidden, fearful and oppressed. How is Christ revealed in such contexts? Peter exhorts his community to embrace joy in the midst of suffering and rejection. Peter makes clear that this exhortation is good news and that this gospel, revealed in Jesus Christ, is what binds them together as a resurrection people called to new birth.

This promise of hope and new birth, then, is no mere religious mood music to make us feel comfortable and 'affirmed'. The gifts of new life patterned on the witness of Jesus are indeed both openly inclusive, welcoming *everyone* as they are – and yet radically transformative, leaving no one 'just the way I am'. Hope in Christ transforms both our fears and our desires, freeing us from our sinful and self-destructive past allegiances, as we see in the next section of the letter (1.14, 18–19). Hope and holiness are linked in an inalienable embrace: to set one's hope on Christ is in every aspect of life to become holy as he is holy, which also continually entails sobering up to 'prepare your minds for action' (1.13, 15–16).

1 Peter 1.13–16

¹³Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ¹⁴Like

obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. ¹⁵ Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶ for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'

In many ways, this section (1.13–16) functions as the centrepiece of the entire chapter. Compare the manner by which these verses are introduced by the word 'Therefore ...'. In this section, Peter moves to a call to action, to discipline, to hope and to holiness. The call to holiness is especially significant, as it is a theme that runs through the whole of the letter. Within this chapter, explicit references can be found in 1.2 ('sanctified/made holy by the Spirit') and 1.14–16 ('he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves'). Clear allusions to the same theme are also found in 1.4 with the 'undefiled' nature of the inheritance kept in heaven; 1.7 speaking about the significance of testing by fire; and the description of Christ in 1.19 as 'a lamb without defect or blemish'. The call to holiness represents an invitation into the life of the triune God; it reveals that which has been made gloriously possible in the good news. As such, holiness is presented both as a condition or state granted to believers through Christ (1.4, 14–16, 19) and as a goal or outcome to which they themselves must attain (1.2, 7, 22). The vocation, the call, of all is to holiness and to God.

The 'given-ness' of holiness is essentially the reality of who Christ is, and forever will be, for all who come to

trust in him. It serves as a reminder to believers of their new-found status before God.² They are made holy by him, and this in turn links contextually with the themes elsewhere in this chapter of 'new birth', 'hope' and 'gift'. Further, this establishment of believers' holy standing before God cannot be undone. It is unchanging, unconditional, already perfect and fully guaranteed. Conversely, the sense whereby believers are expected to conform to a new standard of moral holiness serves as an inescapable call to transformed living. This aspect of incremental holiness focuses on the believers' walk, and in 1 Peter this can be interpreted both individually and in terms of communal identity.

In contrast to the security and constancy of their holy status, the requirement to demonstrate holy living through walking with Christ is liable to fluctuation, to circumstances, to personal choices and to intermittent progress. In this regard, therefore, the experiential nature of holiness can be connected to the themes of maintaining joy in face of hardship and suffering and of what it means to live as 'resident aliens'. Many and relentless pressures, both external and internal, will be brought to bear against the believers' desire to live holy lives. These may be arduous, but ultimately their impact can be purposeful, if understood through the filter of precisely what the chapter and the letter are aiming to teach: Pursue such holiness because the one who calls you is holy (1.15). In regard to all of this, there is a

² The distinction between 'status' and 'walk' for believers is helpfully unpacked by Matt Fuller.

pressing need for the exercise of personal responsibility, and this expression of human effort in no way prevents the grace and operation of the Spirit, but rather, and somewhat counterintuitively, manifests and facilitates it.

Thus, as we can see, 1 Peter is saturated with a concern for holiness and discusses this holiness in more than an abstract or even in a purely behavioural way. While the concept of holiness is often associated with 'separation' or distinction – God's distinction from what is unholy – this truth can give the false impression that holiness is about distance and exclusion. A more accurate view of holiness in biblical terms would see it as the character of God's movement to embrace and transform what is far from God, a movement which, especially in the light of sin, 'costs' God something. Holiness is therefore not an abstention from the bad, but an imitation of God in God's self-sacrificial movement towards the other, which is most explicit in the person of Jesus Christ. As such, holiness is not about exclusion but the transformation of all that is not holy into something that is good. In this way, imitating God's movement towards us should determine the action, the discipline, the behaviour (we could say, the ethics) within the Christian community and communion. God seeks a creation that reflects divine truth, beauty and goodness; holiness is how God achieves this.

Here we see that holiness isn't about performative piety, nor is it something that a Christian can earn. Rather it is given by God, it is a call from God and it leads to transformation. As such, one does not have to have certain abilities to be holy: the marginalized, the weak, the disabled can all be holy. In the Old Testament, from

which 1 Peter draws numerous images, holiness is something that is discussed in terms of the history of God's relationship with Israel. So in 1 Peter, holiness is treated as a characteristic of a great divine movement, embodied in Jesus Christ. The Son of God comes into the world, lives a certain kind of life, and in doing so takes to himself a people. This people, in turn, is carried along in a life lived within the world that is joined to the life of Christ. It is important to see holiness in terms of this divine movement. For, given in Christ, this movement is offered to human beings as the very shape of Christian identity.

The quotation of Leviticus 19.2 that we find in 1.16 – 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' – deliberately and emphatically grounds holiness in the revealed nature of God and the Old Testament. Within the narrative of the exodus wanderings, for example, God's holiness is intended to become a pattern for God's people to imitate. In this there is a further echoing of the 'walk' motif, the idea of journeying spiritually with, and deeper into, God, even as God's people find themselves surrounded by an alien and potentially oppressive culture. The injunction of holiness is double-edged, alluding to a life of separation and devotion on the one hand and to a spirit of perseverance and resilience on the other.

When we look at this theme across 1 Peter, we see that the call to a holy life in 1.15–16 finds its embodiment in being a 'holy priesthood' in 2.5, offering spiritual sacrifices. And this in turn is elaborated in 2.9 in terms of the life of a 'holy people'. All of this – holy life, holy sacrifice, holy peoplehood – is then explained in terms of

a single and marvellous act by God, outlined in 2.10: God calls us out of darkness into light, turning nobodies into a nation, bestowing divine forgiveness on the unforgiven. The entire act of God described here constitutes the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, the self-giving of God for sinful human beings, that takes them with him to his own glory. Holiness, then, is supremely manifest in God *coming close* to the *unholy*, patiently submitting to what is unholy, and thereby transforming it to God's own character of self-sacrificing love. This is a central Gospel proclamation: 'But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 5.8). This proclamation is then given a form within human life and relationship: 'Love your enemies' (Matt. 5.44; Luke 6.27, 35).

Holiness in 1 Peter, therefore, has a profound centre in Christ since it describes the act of God in Christ moving towards what is unholy in order to transform it: what were but 'stones' become 'living' (2.5); those who were 'not a people' become 'God's people' (2.10); those who are 'scattered', 'strangers' and 'lost' (1.1; 2.11, 25), are gathered together 'in Christ' (5.14; 2.25). This body of Christ (see Eph. 2.16), which is given over in suffering for others (2.24), becomes the shared 'calling' of the Church (2.12).

Holiness, then, involves distinction and behaviour, but primarily as aspects of sacrifice, where what is true, good and beautiful is offered up for the sake of others in love. As Christians are joined to Christ, they share in Christ's divine character; and as they love with Christ, they display and receive his divine treasure. The Church's holiness, then, is one oriented to others: not only to the holy within

the Church, but to the unholy within and outside the Church. Jesus is the only one who can make the unholy holy. We might separate ourselves because we have judged another to be unholy. And yet, the call of the Christian is to live on the border of the holy just as Jesus himself loved and broke bread with those considered 'unholy' in his own time. Christ even became sin for us, dying an unholy death as a criminal on a cross, in order to draw the whole world to himself. The call to holiness is always derivative, grounded in Christ. A person is holy, the Church is holy, a community is holy, only because Christ is in the midst of it. Holiness is therefore a movement of sacrifice and of love which is embraced so that the world might in fact be changed and reflect the glory which is 'revealed' finally in the fullness of God's movement of love for the world in Christ (4.13, 14; 5.4, 10).

1 Peter 1.17-25

¹⁷ If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. ²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For

‘All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures for ever.’

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

Peter uses the language of 'inheritance' to describe what is in store for Christians. In the Old Testament, inheritance is the land God promised to God's people (Num. 32.19; Deut. 2.12; 12.9; 25.19; 26.1; Josh. 11.23; Ps. 105.11; also Acts 7.5). Peter understands inheritance, however, no longer in terms of a land promised to Israel but in terms of the end-time hope that lies before believers. The recipients of this letter are sojourners and aliens in this world, they are exiles who face suffering now and their hope is directed to the future inheritance.

Peter gives to inheritance a content that is beyond human history – an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1.4). The crucial means to this living hope is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1.3, 21). Thus, the event of Jesus' resurrection makes the hope of future resurrection a present reality and becomes the basis for the future imperishable inheritance.

The language of imperishability is found throughout this first chapter, and especially in this final section. The significance of this term is that the promised inheritance, given 'with the precious blood of Christ', can never perish or be corrupted. Elsewhere in the New Testament we are told that God is imperishable (Rom. 1.23; 1 Tim. 1.17) and that our resurrection bodies are incorruptible (1 Cor. 15.22). Within the Old Testament and in the context of God's work throughout history, the land of Israel was at times ravaged and destroyed by invading armies. The prophet Isaiah describes the utter destruction of the whole world in God's judgement: The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered (Isa. 24.3). In the Greek version of Isaiah, the word for 'laid waste' and

‘wither’ is the same that Peter uses. But Peter uses the word in a negative form. The world will be destroyed, but our inheritance is indestructible, it is imperishable.

The inheritance, however, is not only imperishable but it is also without blemish, it cannot spoil, it is ‘undefiled’. The inheritance will not lose its lustre and beauty. It will never become stained or filthy. The same word is used to denote Jesus’ sinlessness (Heb. 7.26), the purity of marriage (Heb. 13.4) and genuine religion (James 1.27). Isaiah, just quoted, goes on to tell how people have defiled the earth by breaking God’s law. In the prophecy of Jeremiah, too, God declares that he gave Israel a fertile land, but ‘you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination’ (Jer. 2.7). In contrast, the inheritance Peter speaks about is undefiled and undefilable.

This inheritance, like the word of God, also endures for ever (1.24), it will never ‘fade’. It will last forever, just as the crown of reward that elders receive will never fade away (5.4). Our inheritance is lasting, God’s action in Christ is eternal. It will not fade, wither or dry up like grass. Isaiah reflects on the judgements of God that cause the land and its inhabitants to wither like grass or flowers: ‘The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever’ (Isa. 40.8). Peter quotes that passage at the end of this chapter, and again uses the word we read as ‘imperishable’ (1.23). Because the inheritance described by Peter is in heaven, nothing on earth can alter or destroy it. Peter must use negative terms to describe it (‘imperishable’, ‘undefiled’, ‘unfading’; 1.4) because its reality surpasses our present comprehension.

The chapter concludes with themes that have run

throughout, reminding readers that everything – fear, promise, faith, hope, love, rebirth – is connected to Jesus Christ. The language of being ‘born anew’ through the ‘living and enduring word of God’ remains a central promise of this letter. For just as hope is not stagnant but is living, so too God’s word is not stagnant in this world. And this word promises that the God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory (1.21), will also welcome all those who ‘trust in God’ into the joy of future glory, ‘revealed at the end of the ages for your sake’ (1.20).

While Peter might end this chapter with the reminder that this salvation will not be unveiled until the last day – it is a future event – he does not leave them without hope in their time of exile. For Peter calls the community to mutual love and to unity in Christ in his death and resurrection in a way that supersedes all despair, all division and all that is perishable in this world. The call to ‘love one another deeply from the heart’ is the focus at the end of this first chapter, and is the response that the saving act of God in Christ demands. The resurrection, therefore, is an essential part of the living hope to which Peter calls his community and it is what enables the Christian to stand firm against all that brings death in individual lives, in communities, in this world. The resurrection gives hope and courage to rise up against all that seeks to kill, enabling hope, instilling love and grounding confidence, even in the midst of suffering, in the word of God which endures for ever (1.25).

Excursus: Aliens and Exiles

As we move into the second chapter, Peter continues to address his community as 'aliens and exiles' and urges them to abstain from the passions of the flesh (2.11). The terms 'aliens' and 'exiles' are two different words in Greek. The word for 'alien' derives from a Hebrew word that has many translations, such as 'sojourner', 'foreigner', 'stranger', 'immigrant', and 'resident alien'. The biblical term also refers to a non-Israelite who has no familial or tribal affiliation with those Israelites among whom she or he is living. Therefore, he or she is not treated as a permanent resident and frequently does not have full rights within the community (a situation that we may find in many twenty-first-century societies). Similarly, the term for 'exile' has been translated as 'stranger' or 'foreigner'. There is no consensus as to how best to translate these two terms, but there is agreement that they refer to different ways of being a stranger or outsider; basically they refer to someone who has taken temporary abode in a land that is not his or hers. The Israelites were reminded to show compassion and care to aliens and strangers since they were once 'strangers' in a foreign land, namely Egypt (see Lev. 19.34).

1 Peter reminds the believers that they are 'aliens and exiles' because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. They are exhorted not to conform to the social and religious norms of society, thereby demonstrating their

distinctiveness. Peter also encourages them to engage with the society so as to dispel any suspicions people might have about believers, and furthermore to gain their praise. In other words, Peter emphasizes that the conduct of the believers should be rooted in identity in Christ and as 'aliens and exiles'.

Questions for reflection

- 1 1 Peter is written to a people described as 'resident aliens' who live as exiles and strangers in the world.
 - Who are the exiles, strangers, or aliens in your part of the world?
 - How does your faith in Christ make you an alien or stranger in your world?
 - How does such an identity help you to minister to those who are exiles and strangers in your community?
- 2 1 Peter calls his community to embody a 'living hope'.
 - What does hope look like in your life?
 - When has hope in Christ helped you in your life?
- 3 1 Peter speaks in depth about holiness, calling believers to be holy as God is holy.
 - How does it change your understanding of holiness if you see it as a gift and not something you can earn?
 - What does living a holy life look like?