

Reflecting on the Resurrection – St. Peter **‘Breakfast and the Bible’** **1 Peter 1:3-9**

We're in the Easter season, when we make a point of celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus. Admittedly we're doing so in a rather different way this year! Despite the lack of the usual gatherings, ceremonies and music, God is still God and the truth of the message of Easter still speaks to us in our current situation. In fact, in some ways, I believe that we are gaining some more profound insights. It's good to be reminded that those first believers in Jesus – the followers of 'The Way' – were not meeting in grand purpose-built buildings but often in their homes, in small groups. They were often in fear for their lives and well-being. Neither did they have the New Testament scriptures to help them understand what was going on. As the Church grew, however, key apostles started to write to the fledgling churches to help them become more familiar with the teachings of Jesus and how to apply them. Key amongst these were Peter, James, John and Paul. Indeed, their writings make up most of the New Testament. So let's see what each of them has to say as they reflected back on the momentous events of that first Easter.

We start with Peter, originally called Simon, but renamed by Jesus as *Petros* – the Rock. He emerged as the leader of the first community of followers of Jesus. This is probably why he is also sometimes referred to as *Cephas* – the Head. A key commentary on the Resurrection is to be found in Peter's First Letter. Here we look at part of it in 1 Peter 1:3-9.

Peter – from denial to martyrdom

Peter is one of Jesus' first disciples – 'fishers of men' as Jesus calls them (Mark 1:16-18). He quickly became the *de facto* leader of the Twelve, not that he was always a good example, it has to be said. In the Gospels, we often find him speaking before he engages his brain – notably on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:5-6). His bluster just before Jesus' arrest and trial about never forsaking him (Mark 14:29) draws a rapid riposte from Jesus, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." Poignantly, after the resurrection, the restoration of Peter takes the form of three challenges from Jesus to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15ff). In a remarkable work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter, the humble fisherman, preaches the sermon of his life to thousands of Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2) and some 3000 people come to faith and baptism in the name of Jesus. In Acts 10, Peter is again the preacher at the 'Gentile Pentecost' as the Spirit comes upon non-Jewish believers after his powerful sermon on the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 10:34-43). In his first letter, we hear echoes of Peter's preaching on the resurrection as he begins this letter with a 'hymn' of praise to the God who has raised Christ from the dead and thus revealed his plan for the salvation of all humanity.

Background to 1 Peter

The letter claims 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ' as its author and there is no reason to doubt that claim. He is writing it from 'Babylon' (1 Pet. 5:13) which is code for Rome. We know that Peter ended his days in prison in Rome, where he was martyred for his faith. The passage also connects Peter with Mark, and many people have postulated that the Gospel of Mark is largely based upon the testimony of Peter. 1 Peter was probably written around 62-64 AD, but we cannot be sure.

The letter is addressed to the 'exiles of the Dispersion...' (1 Pet. 1:1), that is believers who have been scattered across what is now Turkey because of persecution. Someone has carried the letter from Rome to each of the churches of the regions in question. There it has been read, and possibly copies made. Undoubtedly, by this time, the churches would have

included Christians of both Jewish and Gentile origins. Its purpose was to encourage the Christians to remain faithful to the core of their faith and to grow in their trust of God, especially in the face of suffering. Prominent are the virtues of faith, obedience and patience. It is possible that the letter was intended as a baptismal sermon, and may even contain elements of an early baptismal liturgy within it. There are several references to being 'born anew' and 3:21 is a key verse: "And Baptism...now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." The early church usually baptised its believers at Easter, so the focus on the resurrection is wholly appropriate.

Verses 3-5

- (3) has echoes of a frequent OT exclamation of praise to God – so e.g. Ruth 4:14 and Psalm 41:13. Peter now adds a name of God never revealed in the OT – 'our Lord Jesus Christ'!
- Praising God is the best remedy for those whose hearts are weighed down because of suffering and the discouragement it brings.
- The words of praise are not empty of substance because we have been 'born anew' or 'born from above' thanks to God's mercy. Something has changed in us. This was what Jesus was on about when talking to Nicodemus in John 3:3,7.
- As a result, we have hope – not some vague aspiration, but something concrete and alive, and its foundation is the resurrection of Christ. The period of suffering will not last for ever. In contrast, our inheritance from God is eternal (4).
- God sets a guard on this inheritance (5). The Psalmist had a sense of God sending his angel to encamp around the faithful (Psalm 34:7) and Jesus spoke of 'guardian angels' for the children (Matthew 18:10).

Verses 6-9

- The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a cosmic event with ramifications for the world and universe, and for all time. And yet its power also shows itself in the minutiae of the everyday lives of individuals. Here Peter reminds his readers that, even in the midst of their day-to-day sufferings, which were not insignificant, they can still rejoice because of the eternal promise of salvation in Jesus.
- 'rejoice' is a word not used by secular Greek writers, and in the NT always means a deep spiritual joy. For example, Mary's spirit *rejoices* in God her Saviour in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-47); her response to learning from the Angel Gabriel that she will bear God's Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Suffering is part of being in a fallen world; God would rather we did not suffer, of course. But if he were to wave a divine magic wand and take it away, he would have to strip humans of our autonomy and, indeed, bring human history to an end. Rather, he gives us the inner strength to get through the times of testing, the same strength shown to perfection in the earthly life of Jesus. A key component of that inner strength is the hope in Christ for what is beyond those sufferings. That seems to have something powerful to say to us in the current situation.
- Ironically, our faith will become even stronger through it, and the image here is of the process for purifying gold. If you've ever seen metals being melted and purified, for example in a steel-works, you will know that it is a dramatic process! It may seem that the fire will destroy the metal, but in fact it allows the impurities and dross to be removed. To make the purest metals, this process is often repeated several times.
- The daily life of a Christian may feel like a continual process of being melted down in the crucible of life, but it produces something so precious – maturity in Christ. Not easy to endure or understand at the time, but of immense value to God, as he encourages us to share that hope with others.

In the words of an Easter hymn:

*Jesus lives! For us he died; then, alone to Jesus living,
Pure in heart may we abide, glory to our Saviour giving. Alleluia!*