

Easter 5 year A

In the introduction to Peter's first letter he tells us that he is writing to 'the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia (that is, the Roman province called Asia, not the continent) - (which included the cities of Ephesus and Colossae, where Paul had planted churches), and the province of Bithynia - in other words, to the small scattered communities of Asia Minor, mainly modern day Turkey; they would have been, in the main, small Jewish communities which had now, following their conversion to Christianity, accepted Gentiles within their fellowship. Life was hard for these early Christians. In the Greco-Roman world in which they lived, Christianity was a despised foreign religion. The Jews they could tolerate, they had been around for so long - but this new religion they did not like - it threatened the status quo. Brotherhood between masters and slaves, worshipping and eating together; giving rights of any kind to women; dividing families in a very patriarchal and hierarchical society - no thank you. This just did not fit into the social norms of the Greco-Roman world, those norms which accepted slavery as a fact of life - indeed, desirable, necessary.

Peter needs to encourage and strengthen them. 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people'; and quoting from the prophet Hosea - 'Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people'.

What is so noticeable about this passage of scripture is that it is all in the plural. This letter is addressed to communities not individuals. Holiness is not any individual's private possession, it exists only when someone loves another - you cannot be holy on your own. WE are God's people. WE are the royal priesthood. Not ME. Not YOU, but WE - US, as a family, as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. They - we - the people to whom Peter is writing, have to grow together into salvation. And that is why we need what Peter calls 'spiritual milk'. Otherwise we would become like a malnourished child - and we see plenty of those on the television these days, don't we? - as famine stalks once again across Africa and the Middle East - listless, helpless, sometimes not able to absorb the food offered.

But what is this spiritual milk? The easy answer, of course, is the Word of God as written in the New Testament. But when Peter was writing there was no New Testament. Some of Paul's letters were circulating, but the Gospels weren't there, yet - but much

of what Peter says comes straight from the Jewish Scripture - the Old Testament, and especially from Isaiah and the Psalms. He quotes or alludes to the Jewish Scriptures time and time again. We have had no Old Testament reading today, except for the Psalm - but this little reading from Peter's letter is full of Old Testament thought. But let us look at the Psalm - the writer, whoever he was, asks God to be 'my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe'. Rocks and stones are dropped down all over the place in the Old Testament - I once led a Quiet Day which took rocks and stones as the theme - a whole day meditating upon this theme. Peter calls Jesus the *living stone*. If you know your scriptures the word stone or rock will immediately bring to mind the Temple, sacrifice, holiness, a spiritual house, water in the desert, shade from the sun, relief, safety.

The psalmist goes on to ask God to lead him and guide him. This is the God whose Son says 'I am the way'.

I have heard, more than once, that we don't need to know anything about the Old Testament - we simply need the Gospel stories. I would beg to differ. Words can mean a lot more than they appear to say at first glance, because they are culturally bound - if I say 'the oval', you know I am not talking about a

geometric shape; if I say 'red cross', a lot more than the symbol itself is understood; if I say 'the pentagon', we don't think of a five sided figure. There are lots of words in our scripture which come straight out of the Jewish Scripture - and they mean a lot more than their face value - which is why we need to read and understand the Old Testament, so that we understand this symbolic language. What does 'lamb of God' mean? What do all the words about grape vines and vineyards mean?

Let us look again briefly at the Letter of Peter. What does he mean when he calls Jesus a living stone, chosen and precious? The quotes come from Isaiah (twice) and psalm 118, a joyful psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from enemies, and in all three of these quotes the stone is either a place of refuge or a stumbling block, a place where you will be secure and protected or a place of mishap and pain. Those to whom Peter was writing would have understood this, because the Jewish converts would have known the scripture, and the Gentile converts would have asked for the scripture to be explained to them.

I am reminded of two stories - the road to Emmaus and Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In both stories it is by searching the Jewish scriptures that the truth about Jesus is revealed. The

travellers on the way to Emmaus tell Jesus that they thought he was the one who would redeem Israel. They have heard the rumours of resurrection, but still haven't grasped the truth - because they were looking for a different kind of redemption to the one which Jesus is offering. So beginning with Moses, Jesus opens the scriptures to them - he is not saying anything new, just asking them to look at the scriptures in a different way - and no doubt the Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah would have figured strongly. How many times do we read 'This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the prophet', or this happened 'in accordance with the scriptures'? On the road to Emmaus, Jesus guided the travellers through these scriptures, through the prophecies, so that the truth about him became clear - and then they began to recognise him.

And the eunuch? He is reading Isaiah, one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant, but doesn't understand - who is Isaiah writing about? Philip is able to lead him through the prophecies and on to the story of Jesus, as fulfilment of those prophecies - and 'what is to stop me being baptised?' the eunuch asks.

In the book Deuteronomy we read 'The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it'. As

Christians we believe that Jesus is the Word of God made incarnate and revealed to us as the man who walked the land and talked and healed, who died and was raised from the dead. But that Word is revealed to us not only in the Gospels, the stories of his earthly life, nor only in the letters which early Christians wrote to encourage one another - it is revealed in the writings of his people, the writings he would have heard, read and learnt by heart, the writings he quoted and used as prayers, and indeed, in the letter of Peter, where he repeatedly quotes or alludes to the Jewish Scriptures. They are a treasure chest - a gift from God to help us understand his plan and his faithfulness - not dictated by God, but inspired by him as his people journeyed towards the joy of the fulfilment of his promise - 'I will be your God and you shall be my people.' Amen.

Thank you to those of you who replied to my question about the omission of 1P2.18 last week, on the subject of slavery. It isn't easy, is it?, to make sense in our society of an instruction to slaves to be obedient to their masters - and, as some of you suggested, this verse might have been omitted from the Sunday lection because of squeamishness or revulsion. Let us look at it in

its context. This is part of Peter's household code (2.13-3.12). In 2.18-20 he addresses slaves but not their masters; in 3.1-7 he addresses wives and their husbands, asking everyone to love one another. So perhaps Peter felt that slaves were part of the community of faith, but slave owners were not, still being pagan (?). Could it be that Christians had decided not to keep slaves? (Now tell that to companies who organise their business plan around workers in the gig economy with zero hours contracts - isn't that a form of slavery?).

In the Greco-Roman world, stability was key. You were born into a certain position or trade, and there you stayed. There was no concept of 'upward-mobility'. Your chief function was to function - as what you were born into. The Gospel challenged all that, seeing the social world as horizontal not vertical, not as oppression but as collaboration - a feeling for the common good - something which has emerged over the last few weeks. Given that Christianity was seen as a threat to the given order, and hence persecuted, perhaps (only perhaps) Peter wanted to subdue the threat to the church by supporting the given order (like Paul telling people that all authority was from God). Certainly the early church struggled to live within the accepted

social order (and quickly lost interest in Jesus' ideal of equality for women).

I'm just musing - I am not a theologian, my degrees are in history, not theology or divinity, but I did come across the following, which might be of interest to some of you.

The total social program that Jesus advocated was based on communion, friendship, distribution, and partnership. This contrasts with a social organization based on domination, exploitation, accumulation, and force. His program's central principle is equality, just as the contrasting paradigm's principle is inequality. The latter is vertically ordered by "power over." The former is horizontally ordered by sharing and mutual care. Even what might have been a vertical dimension—the power of God over all—is developed [through Jesus] in a horizontal way by the distributed Spirit indwelling each social entity (individual, family, local community, the whole people). This distribution of the God-expressing Spirit implies that people must be in active partnership with God at all points.

Beatrice Bruteau, *The Holy Thursday Revolution* (Orbis Books: 2005), 219–220

Stay safe. Blessings

Christine