

Cheadle Hulme – 15th Sept 2013 - Evening Service

"Be holy, because I am holy"

It happened over 20 years ago now, but I still remember the day of my driving test vividly, as I'm sure many of us still do. I thought it was going to be a good day when I got into the car ready for the test, and the examiner got in and said "Good morning Mr Castledine. My name is Ian Castledine." I can assure you that this wasn't some dodgy deal set up by the Castledine family, and while it is not a common name up here, in Derby there are quite a few Castledines about! There is a story of a driver in California who had taken an almost perfect driving test. "He only made one mistake," said the examiner, "when he stopped to let me out of the car. After breathing a sigh of relief, the boy exclaimed, 'I'm just glad I don't have to drive like that all the time!'"

How often do we treat our Christian lives like that? With a sense that we have somehow got through the gateway to a Christian life - like passing the driving test gives us a card that says for the next however many years we are authorised to drive. We have accepted Christ into our lives, have performed perfectly, ticked the box, prayed the prayer, been accepted by God, and can then get on with living our lives... except that us Christians all too often do the equivalent of getting out of the car and breathing a sigh of relief, and saying "I'm just glad I don't have to live like that all the time!"

As I read through that passage that we heard from Peter's first letter, there were many things that struck me, and a load of other things struck Rick when he read it through as well. But the thing that really seemed to stick out were the first few verses, that focus on holiness - being holy, and of the challenge that living holy lives presents to us. Too often it feels like us Christians are just a bit too much like chameleons, changing our behaviour to match the situation that we are in, like chameleons change their colour depending on their mood and surroundings and so on. And isn't it true that that so often just happens because of our human nature - not because of any conscious decision, not because we're particularly bad people.

And that passage is a great prod to us to reflect on what it is to 'be holy' as Peter describes, and how that impacts our lives.

The notion of holiness itself is somewhat challenging. For some people the notion of holiness has got certain negative connotations. Phrases like 'Holier than thou' haven't helped - but we maybe still have an idea of holiness as being suitable for someone like the Pope - someone set aside to worship and pray and live a life devoted to God - but somehow distant from the challenges of daily life, although it does seem that Pope Francis is trying to buck that trend. Maybe we have negative views of holiness as being 'too much of God and not enough real life'.

However maybe the principle of holiness is much more positive to us. Maybe we have strong views about 'spiritual heroes' - of people who were focussed on living out God-led lives, dedicated to serving others, and I'm sure many names and faces of people - famous and known just to us who we would class as "holy people".

But the realities of daily life can challenge our ideas of how best to attain those principles of holiness that Peter speaks about. How easy is it to look at ourselves and think - you know, compared to some of those holy people through the ages, gosh I am nothing compared to them. How can I possibly attain that sense of holiness that Peter speaks of. I fall so far short, where would I even begin? Let's unpick some of what Peter says.

Read : 1 Peter 1 13-16

1. Some thoughts about those words. Firstly, picking up the first word of the passage - "Therefore". Very bad practice of me to pick a reading that so clearly is a response to something that has come before! The verses that precede this passage in my NIV are entitled "Praise to God for a Living Hope", and talk about the hope and salvation that is to be found in Jesus. And that gives us a sense of the backdrop for these words - that everything has changed because of Jesus. A couple of weeks ago I went to a Halle Concert at Jodrell Bank. The stage was set up in the shadow of the

massive Lovell radio telescope, and in the first half as it got dark, the telescope was lit with groovy coloured lighting - enough for everyone to point at it and say "aahh isn't it pretty". At the start of the second half, it all changed, and they showed a video of Bernard Lovell, projected onto the telescope. And as it started, jaws dropped all around the place, because it was just incredible to see - just incredible. And for the rest of the concert they proceeded to play videos of stars and galaxies on the massive telescope. The change from being 'isn't it pretty' to 'jaw-dropping' was just immense, and incredible.

And at the start of this reading Peter reminds us of the backdrop to his message - that everything has changed. That everything that was prophesied about and had been talked about for generations, has happened - that Jesus has come to earth, that the Saviour has been raised from the dead. It has changed everything, and you know what - you need to do something about it.... and so he starts - "Therefore" ...

2. "Therefore prepare your minds for action...". Get ready (v13) - or as the KJV puts it "Gird up your loins." which sounds painful! And there are comparisons here with the same idea that appears in Exodus 12, where Moses and Aaron are instructed in how to eat the Passover meal. Discussing the Passover meal, Exodus 12:11 says "This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover" The King James translation of both passages using this phrase in Exodus, and in 1 Peter - 'gird your loins' - literally have your cloak tucked up ready to go.. There is a sense of eating and yet being ready to move on - of being aware of the world, yet not becoming so comfortable that we forget to keep our eyes on God and his ways. And there is the same idea here - be in the world, but be focussed on Jesus' return. Be aware of the world, but not focussed on serving it. Live as people with an eye on Jesus - living as part of the world, but with ready for action, ready to serve.

I'm reminded of the image of the leaders of the G8 when they met at Gleneagles earlier in the year - do you remember they all took their ties off (apart from Angela Merkel who couldn't quite work out what the female equivalent was), and all the pictures in the press of Cameron meeting the leaders in his rolled up shirt sleeves... the message was - we've taken our ties off, because now is the time for us to get some work done"

And we have the same message here - given the backdrop of the salvation offered to us through Jesus by God's grace, the time for talking is over, the time for action is here. Roll up your sleeves, and be ready.

3. "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled" I don't usually keep going back to Ancient Greek in passages, but in this one I think it is quite useful - the original words say something like "being sober" or "of 'sober mind'". The message I think is that as you are prepared for action because of God's grace that has been poured out for us, be clear headed. One commentary I looked at on this passage said "The main work of a Christian lies in the right management of his heart and mind. The best Christians have need to be exhorted to self-control."

On the surface maybe we could simply affirm that that reflects good Christian character - to be of sober mind. Certainly my grandparents as good Wesleyan Methodists would have promoted the sober part of that. But maybe there is something more here for us.

One of the things that many Christians have been struggling with in recent weeks is the issues being faced in Syria. In some ways it was reassuring to have church leaders come out to speak out so clearly against the military action that was being discussed 2 or 3 weeks ago, because until that point I think there were many of us who were confused about the whole thing. We want to be on the side of good - we want to be on the side that is speaking out against the use of chemical weapons; we want to do something - and the politicians are telling us that we must strike back with military action, and the alternative of doing nothing would just affirm the Syrian government's actions; and yet it all feels wrong - it doesn't feel like that is the right solution. But if we do nothing, are we just siding with those who have caused so much harm, and are we not standing up for the oppressed? Gosh it's hard. The

developments this week would seem to suggest that standing up against military action has led to non-violent progress, but that whole situation has been a great reminder for our need to be sober-minded - self-controlled. It is so hard to balance the call to be ready and do something, as we get in the first part of the verse, with the need for careful thinking and patience. It is so easy to get swept along - and good reminder to have a sober mind - seek the mind of Christ, to do the things he would do. And isn't that so tightly tied up with the spiritual maturity which is picked up at the start of Chapter 2 - that as we become more mature in our faith that our awareness of how to put our faith into action, of how to have a 'sober mind' grows. There is a whole other sermon in 2:2-3, but just listen to the words "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, not that you have tasted that the Lord is good". In other words, desire spiritual development, desire spiritual growth - long for the Spirit to be poured out in your hearts and minds that you will grow and mature and have hearts and minds that become more aligned with Christ.

"Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self controlled"

and then 4. "Set your hope fully on grace". Because while the backdrop to all of this is God's grace - grace that demands action, it is also God's grace that we hope and rely on - because in that we find our safety net.

As I reflected on this passage, what really struck me was the challenge to live out holy lives, whilst facing up to the tensions and realities of life. I think the point is that we are fundamentally flawed. Whilst we have passages like this in scripture to challenge and encourage us, we have to accept that we will fall far short of God's idea of perfection - we fundamentally can't do it; so we simply have to keep returning to Jesus - and to the hope that we have in God's grace.

in 1 Timothy, Paul writes "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst". He writes that just after reminding Timothy of the things that he got up to before he found faith in Christ. And yet even after Paul had been converted, and accepted God's grace and forgiveness - he still recognises his failings - I am the worst. Not I was the worst. And we need to continue to have that same recognition - that we must continue to rely on God's grace. Really it is only in doing that that we can make any sense of what it is to live a life set apart to serve God.

And that isn't meant as a ticket to just go about doing whatever we like. It's not like the driving test ticket to do whatever -

'I'm just glad I don't have to drive like that all the time!'" - but is a gracious reminder by God that that we must set our eyes firmly on his grace. That when we fail, we are not condemned - not like 12 points on a driving licence and you're disqualified, but can be forgiven out of his sheer love and grace.

"Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy".

A couple of thoughts to draw this together.

Firstly, living a holy life is about having hearts and minds changed by Jesus, ready for action, led by a deep desire to serve him as best we can. I read a great headline on an article this week - "Holiness - a mask we wear, or a lifestyle to live by?" Like a chameleon, do we put our 'holy' mask on when we need to, or do we live our holiness throughout our life? Rick described it really well to me, when he said something like it is

"The call to stop being wrapped up in churchmanship (and all that 'church' often brings with it)"

- because we find that so easy don't we - so easy for our faith to become about how we do church, and not about how we treat one another, how we serve God etc. Rather than our faith and being part of the body of Christ being about a call to action, it so easily and quickly ends up about how we do church, rather than how we support and grow and live active Christian lives. The challenge is how our lifestyle - how the things we go about doing day in day out are affected by our call to holiness.

Secondly, in v17, Peter says "live like strangers in a land" and by that I think he again reminds us to not get sucked into being focussed on the world, but instead to keep our eyes on Jesus - gird your loins. I was privileged to visit India with work a few weeks ago, and never have I felt so much like a stranger in a land - from being the only white face in Trivandrum airport when I arrived, to being placed in such a different culture. I was pleased to be able to come home at the end of the week, not because I didn't enjoy it, but because there comes a point when you want to be surrounded by familiar, comfortable things. And the message here is for us to not become so comfortable in the world around us that we forget this message that we are not to become so engrained in the world that we lose the ability to lift our eyes and see God, see what God is doing, see what God wants us to do. Gird up your loins - be ready for action, able to see the things that God would have us do.

And in all of that, I pray that we might become more aware of what being holy should mean to us and what we should do about it. It is an incredibly challenging prospect, and the danger is that we are so fearful of not achieving holiness, that we discount even trying. But as we remembered earlier, the backdrop to all of this is God's love and grace - set out for us in Jesus, as our living hope - and so I hope these words then become words of encouragement - challenge yes as well, but encouragement that he walks alongside us as we struggle to live out these words "Be holy in all you do, because I am holy"