

1 Peter 2:9-17

I remember vividly speaking to my sister-in-law about my new found faith.

“Ah” she said “I know what an evangelical Christian is. They were the ones at university who always sat together, ostentatiously said grace before meals, and looked permanently glum.”

In every age that stereotype has been around. In Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* we find the pious Miss Thorne

Whose virtues were too numerous to describe and not sufficiently interesting to deserve description.

Our children grew up watching the television series *Children of the New Forest* set in the English civil war. There the Catholic Cavaliers, are honourable, hard working, colourful and naturally joyful, whilst the evangelical Roundheads are wild eyed destructive fundamentalists, burning houses, forever quoting Bible verses, and hunting heretics.

No-one could walk into a contemporary evangelical church like ours and really believe those stereotypes. It is not impossible to find evangelical Christians who live up to their own stereotypes, but I doubt whether they have ever been dominant. When I read what the national newspapers say today about evangelicals it bears very little resemblance to the grass roots reality that I see. Novelists and journalists love to parade the outlandish and the extreme.

However, for an awful lot of Christians, and those considering Christianity, enough of the mud sticks to make real bible Christianity look rather unattractive. Our reading of 1 Peter, so far, for instance, could reinforce that. Peter introduced his letter with a bleak assessment of their status in the world.

1 Peter 1:1

He goes on to elaborate what a Catholic friend of mine calls a “veil of tears theology”.

Peter describes them as suffering all kinds of trials and goes on.

1 Peter 1:7

If you were of a morbid disposition you might be tempted to describe this as a “grin and bear it” attitude to life.

And then there is the relentless battle against sin which Peter calls us to. 1 Peter 1:17 for instance.

1 Peter 1:17

A journalist in the Guardian commenting on Vaughan Roberts article about battling with same sex attraction, that we mentioned last week, said that such a lifestyle “lacks joie de vivre.”

And then last week as we read about God’s people being living stones, being built together into a “spiritual house,” it wouldn’t be difficult to see this as a mandate to live in a holy huddle. John Stott used to talk about “rabbit hole Christians” who venture out occasionally to graze but as soon as any danger arises they bolt for cover.

Perhaps you are sitting here thinking that Peter’s vision of the Christian life is a bit negative, a bit dull, a bit restricted, a bit inward looking – a dull trudge through a veil of

tears waiting for the pie in the sky when we die. If that is you then this morning I want to lift your eyes to the glorious purpose that God has ordained for our lives. While we live on this earth we have the glorious opportunity to display the beauty of God and Christ, to a world that desperately needs to see it.

We do it, first of all, says Peter, by our speech

➤ *By our speech*

📖 **1 Peter 2:9**

Peter draws on a whole lot of titles that in the Old Testament described the nation of Israel. They were a chosen people – not chosen because of their greatness but because of God’s love. They were a royal priesthood – or as it is put in Exodus 19 “a kingdom of priests” – a people gathered under the kingship of God, to mediate the blessing of God and the truth about God to the world. They were a holy nation – set apart, different. They were God’s special possession. All that applied to Old Testament Israel now applies to the church. The difference that now we are brought to together not by bonds of family or tribe, but because we have a common experience of God’s mercy.

📖 **1 Peter 2:10**

Here is the extraordinary privilege of being God’s people – but notice centrally what our purpose is. V9

that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

You know that is often used as a mandate to gather behind closed doors on a Sunday, or at great Christian conferences, and sing our praises in a symbolically closed circle. But that fatally reduces the force of that word “declare.” Declarations are public not private. They are outward not inward. They are for all not just the saints.

And what are we to declare? The praises, or I think the older translations had it better “the excellencies” or “the perfections” of God.

If you are a Christian here you belong to a God who is perfect in every way. He is perfect in his awesome majestic power. He spoke and the universe came into being. And it was so good, that the book of Job says poetically that the morning stars sang together for joy. Your average physicist sees the extraordinary consistency of the laws of nature and concludes that they must just eternally be like that. What if it actually points to a perfectly faithful God who upholds the universe nanosecond by nanosecond and has done so now for billions upon billions of years? What if the wonderful simplicity of the laws of science in which slowly all our disparate observations are coming together into a unified system, what if that demonstrates the glorious simplicity of God. He is just, he is faithful, he is omnipotent, omniscient, most fundamentally he is love and out of those few characteristics sprang the glorious explosion which we call the universe.

He creates extraordinary beauty, from vast mountains to delicate flowers, from the awesome dangerous tiger to the Labrador resting her head on my lap.

And he has a wonderful balance in his character. He is perfectly just – so that every wrong is punished and will be put right. And he is perfectly merciful – so that everyone who calls on him can be forgiven. And he brings those together in the cross of Christ, in which in his justice he pays for our sins, so that in his mercy he can forgive without violating his justice.

He is infinitely wise, yet children can know him. He overflows with love, yet he is rightly to be feared.

And it is our task to find ways to tell the world about those perfections!

Boring? Inward looking? A veil of tears?

Imagine an explorer who found a new land, with snow white beaches, fruit hanging from every tree, sunshine every day – he returns to tell anyone who will hear about his discovery – that is us.

Imagine a young man who meets the most beautiful girl and they fall in love and he goes off to find his mates and can't stop talking about her – that is us.

Imagine a diamond miner who finds the most stunning diamond that makes the Koh I Noor look like a trinket. And he can't stop telling everyone about it – that is us.

We portray the beauty of God by our speech, and by our lifestyle.

➤ *Our lifestyle*

There is a negative side to that. There are things we must abstain from.

1 Peter 2:11

The accusation of lack of “joie de vivre” against us lies in the view that restraint must always be life denying. What rubbish!! We train our children to abstain from the sinful desire to fight and bite so that they can enjoy happy relationships. We train ourselves to control greed so that we can cultivate contentment. And we train ourselves in sexual chastity so that the deep riches of human relationships are not sullied by sexual incontinency.

So many reflex desires actually bring long term misery – as every child learns true joie de vivre comes from controlling sinful desire which war against our souls.

But there is a positive side too.

1 Peter 1:12

Notice our lives are to be lived “among the pagans” as Peter puts it. Church is vital – we must be built together as living stones. But we live our lives out there amongst people.

What is happening here is really important. We are building community, we are learning from the bible, we are praising God together. Church is vital. But we are doing that to enable you to live good lives in a mixed world.

We leave this place with the reputation of Christ on our shoulders. As you relate your non-Christian friends. As you go to work on Monday remember their view of Christ in part depends on you. If you get involved in gossip, or petty fiddling, or if you are lazy, or careless at work – the reputation of Christ suffers. But when you are kind, diligent, not money grabbing, honest – Christ will be glorified.

Certainly there will be those who slander you. Plenty of people hate goodness because of the way that it exposes them. But in the end your goodness will produce fruit.

Someone who is not yet a Christian was just talking to me this week about a member of this church. They said to me “one thing is for certain, whatever I hear about evangelical Christians I know that this person is not mad, or warped, or a kill joy. So I thought I would come to your church.”

That is the way that it happens.

And then we display the goodness of God by our engagement with society.

➤ *Our engagement with society*

📖 **1 Peter 2:13-15**

Now here is a real tension. Peter was writing to people who were increasingly at odds with the Roman authorities. It wouldn't be long before they were being executed simply for being Christians. And Peter knew that there are things that they could not compromise on as Christians. Peter was the one who had said before the authorities in Acts 4

“Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19–20, NIV)

Sometimes we must resist. The power of the witness of the early church lay in part in the fact that they were prepared to die rather than renounce their faith.

But they weren't to pick fights to the lawmakers. Their fundamental attitude was to be submission. To honour the many good things that they do – punishing wrong, commending right.

Many of you will know that I am convinced that this is an area that we evangelicals have got rather wrong in the last few decades. Os Guinness, the Christian author, suggests that we have three options in relating to society at large. We can be idiots, tribespeople, or citizens.

By idiots he means actually what the ancients used to mean by the word. If you look idiot up in Wikipedia you will find

In Athenian democracy [an idiot was] someone who was characterized by *self-centeredness* and concerned almost exclusively with *private*—as opposed to *public*—affairs

Os Guinness's Christian idiot lives entirely privately. Having nothing to do with the world, and hoping that the world will have nothing to do with them. That will not do – we live “among the pagans”.

The second option – tribespeople – is a popular one today. It sees our main task as preserving the rights and privileges of our tribe. That is fundamentally against the character of Christ who did not hang on his own status and privilege

“rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7–8, NIV)

Our task, says Guinness, is to be citizens. To work for the common good, which is not the same as “our good.” I am not sure our fundamental identity as Christians is being violated if we agree not to wear a cross at work – why not submit? When we work of a secular agency it is perhaps inappropriate to share our faith, particularly if it is unsolicited. Jesus has a way of glorifying himself through patient faithful submissive lifestyles.

And when real issues of conscience arise Christians should be work to find ways in which everyone's conscience is respected. A couple of years ago the government decided to suppress all adoption agencies which would not place children with same sex couples and the Catholic adoption agencies found themselves in conflict with them. A

that point the philosopher Ronald Dworkin, who disagreed profoundly with the Catholic agencies nevertheless pointed out that it was possible for the government to achieve its goal of placing children in same sex households whilst preserving the consciences of the Catholic agencies – through ensuring that same sex couples had access to other agencies. It is not rocket science – it is the way governments have worked for centuries as they work for the common good. Indeed Christians, especially non-conformist Christians – led the way in articulating this vision of “the common good.” Sadly we have substantially forgotten it, as have successive governments, and we are left as tribespeople fighting our respective corners.

Our calling is to live for Christ as citizens of a nation which does not honour Christ, and yet which we can work with to achieve good things for all. What does that mean for gay marriage? Certainly the gay lobby is fighting as a tribe trampling over others – but at the very least Christians should be finding ways to rise above narrow tribal instincts and to think hard about how we make this country a free and equal place even for those we disagree with.

And lastly we display the glory of God by our freedom.

➤ **Freedom**

📖 **Peter 2:16**

Now here is an irony. Summed up by Martin Luther in his essay on Christian Freedom

A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.

Notice that Peter puts it slightly differently. He describes us as “slaves of God.” Radically committed to serving God and loving him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. And that will mean that we ruthlessly shun evil.

But that makes us totally free in the world. It is shocking the degree with which people accept that they are slaves of their own inner impulses. I remember vividly when Woody Allen left Mia Farrow ran off with his stepdaughter. When questioned about it he said

The heart wants what it wants

The joy of being a Christian means that devoting our hearts to a God who loves us, and calls us to a genuinely good life, actually sets us free from all that. Woody Allen is a self-confessed slave in this world – Christians are free.

Now I ask you does that sound boring, introverted, a veil of tears? If you are a Christian here you have the most glorious calling for the whole of your life. To display the perfections of God to this world – by your speech, in your lifestyle, as we engage with our mixed society and seek their genuine good, by living lives of true freedom.

Here is where we gather to learn, to be encouraged, to be supported – but the rest of your life is where that gets worked out.