

E100 Week 19: Living in the World

Read 1 Peter 1:13-25 and 2:9-12

The 5 readings that we're looking at this week are labelled "The Apostles Teaching" and are extracts of letters written by Paul, Peter, James, and John.

Quite a disparate group of men.

We have Paul – the zealous Jew, who had an extraordinary meeting with Jesus whilst persecuting the Christians and then channelled all his energy and zeal into serving the Lord. A man who was also a great thinker and writer, and who explained the gospel in very detailed ways in some of his letters – often to our confusion as we try to understand his train of thought across the centuries and through different translations.

There's Peter, who was given that name by Jesus, from his original of Simon, when the Lord said that Peter would become the rock on which He would build His church. A funny kind of rock – impetuous, a fighter, a failure who denied his Lord. But God's kind of rock: someone who loved Jesus and served Him with his whole heart, his whole being.

My reference books tell me that there are 4 or 5 different men named James in the NT, depending on your understanding of who's being referred to on certain occasions. The author of the book of James is understood to be James, the brother of Jesus. Jesus brothers, if you remember, who didn't accept his teachings initially, and perhaps found it hardest to accept that their family member was not only from God, but that he was God himself. Well that same James, went on to become a leader of the early church and a member of the church council in Jerusalem. He was very practical in his advice, a 'doer', you might say.

And finally we come to John. John who, like Peter, had been a disciple of Jesus. Had walked and talked with him. Listened to and learned from him. And who had witnessed the empty tomb and the fact of the resurrected Christ. A fisherman by trade, perhaps a rough and ready kind of chap, who described himself in his gospel as the disciple whom Jesus loved, and who gives us a moving call in his letter to love and be loved.

Very different men then, with very different experiences of Jesus in their lives, so you might expect their letters to be very different in approach and content. Whilst these writings are different stylistically, the thing that struck me most was the themes that kept coming up again and again:

- love: God's love for us and our love for each other;
- that we have new life and are a new creation because of Jesus;
- and the temporary nature of this life, both good and bad, and a focus on eternity and that which will last.

The 5 readings are book-ended by two of the most famous passages on love that there are. The first, from 1 Corinthians 13, is often read at weddings as an example of the ideal of love that the newly weds might aspire to: patient, kind, not easily angered... And then comes the honeymoon and, like New Year's resolutions, these ideals go out the window. The passage, however, is broader and more timeless than the glow of a wedding day, and speaks of love as being the essential under-girding of all that we do and say.

Then the last passage, from 1 John 3 and 4, requires us to love one another because God is love, and he lives in us. Not that God loves and therefore we ought to love because he does, but rather that by definition God is love and if his spirit is living and moving in our lives then that needs to be the definition of who we are as well.

Not just these book-end passages however, but all of our readings this week refer to God's love, and the expression of it in our lives. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 says it is Christ's love that compels him and his fellow workers to share the gospel as they do. The passage we read from 1 Peter acknowledges that because in Jesus we have sincere love for one another, we should then love each other deeply, whilst James goes to great lengths to explain that love has to be expressed in action: faith and works; belief and love, but love in action, not simply a theoretical concept.

"All you need is love" says the song, but do we really understand what is meant by all these references to love? The song, and popular culture, focus on relational love, whether that be romantic, within families or between friends; and it is true that as human beings we need that kind of love. We were created to live in relationship with one another and with God. When those relationships are damaged or even, for some people, non-existent, we are very aware that there is something lacking, something very wrong in our lives.

But the passages, and scripture as a whole, refer to more than simply a relational kind of love. We see God's love for his people and his creation throughout the whole of the OT as he tries to establish a covenant people who will be holy in a fallen world, who will live out kingdom values and be a blessing to the nations; and then in the NT we see the greatest expression of God's love as he comes to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to live, experience and ultimately die, as a man, to buy back the rights over our lives that were lost by Adam, on behalf of all mankind, in the Garden of Eden. However you understand those initial chapters of Genesis, the NT makes it abundantly clear that Jesus' death was necessary, to redeem his people, to buy us back from slavery to sin, and to enable us to live in the freedom of his love.

And that love isn't a wishy washy Hollywood kind of love, all soft focus, tears and storylines neatly tied up. It isn't romantic fiction where after much confusion, misunderstanding and often farcical error, the hero and heroine finally get to live happily ever after. God's love is the love that gets a parent out of bed to their crying baby for the umpteenth night in a row; it's the love that forgives a husband or wife for being, well, actually, the person they were when you married them. It's the love that uses our God-given imagination to put ourselves in the shoes of another and to think how we might want to be treated, if we were they. It's the love that welcomes the stranger, feeds the hungry and clothes the poor.

A few times in this week's readings there are references to us as believers being aliens and strangers in the world. Those who don't really belong here, whose citizenship is in heaven. As I thought about that I wondered about what it means to be in the world but not of the world. Traditional teaching has focussed on not being tainted, polluted, by a world that is inherently selfish, greedy, accepts immorality as easily as a cup of tea, and has no understanding or acceptance of our creator God.

And although that is a very important part of these verses, sometimes I wonder how much this approach has contributed to the caricatured impression people have of the church these days, where we're seen as people who say 'don't do this, don't do that, no, no, no.'

We are to live in this world as God's holy people, and that does mean considering our conduct with regards to matters of morality, but these passages suggest a more positive focus. That we should be in the world and not of the world and that that should be evident by our love. That we should stand out as different not, first and foremost, because of what we don't do but because of our love, because of what we do. Because of the attitude that emanates from us and surrounds us. Because of the way we treat, first of all, each other, but also because of the way we treat those around us. With kindness, with gentleness, with respect, and most of all, with love.

I joined the Mum's housegroup this week and the reading that was shared then was on these same lines, from later on in 1 Peter, from chapter 4, where Peter says we are to *Love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*

The notes we were looking at went on to expand that thought to explain that to love each other deeply means to love sacrificially, as Jesus loved and loves us. That love costs, and that love met with opposition needs to love and to carry on loving.

We love because Jesus first loved us, and because his spirit lives in us. If God by definition, is love, then love should be the over-riding factor and motivation in our behaviours and attitudes, in our thoughts and actions.

Easy to do? Well, no. If it was then all these gentlemen wouldn't have found it so necessary to keep emphasising the same point again and again in their letters. Vital, though? Essential to our calling and conduct as Christians? Absolutely. And it is God's Holy Spirit living in us that makes such love possible. As I said a few weeks ago when we looked at the fruits of the Spirit – which has love as the first on the list – if this is an area we struggle with then asking for the Spirit's help, with those people or situations where we find it hard to be loving, really is the best place to start.

I mentioned two other themes in the readings this week; that of new life and being a new creation in Jesus; and the temporary nature of this life we're now living.

Whilst time doesn't allow me to expand at length on these themes, I just wanted to share a few thoughts.

If Jesus' death and resurrection opens up the possibility of new life for us, if in accepting by faith, the freedom he has bought for us we become a new creation, then as those new creations we need to feed and grow strong. We heard from the end of 1 Peter chapter 1 an analogy of believers as newborn babies, craving spiritual milk.

Do we crave the word of God? I mean, really crave it? Miss it if we don't spend time reading it? Become aware that there's something missing from our approach to the day if we haven't spent time with God and his word?

I think the analogy struck me so forcibly because I'm still of an age and social group where I spend a lot of time with people who have newborn babies. Where you hear the stories and experience the sounds of infants making it very clear that they would like feeding and that they would like it NOW!

When we first become Christians we often have that thirst for God's word, and do read it all the time. Somehow, though, as we continue on our Christian journey, it's so easy to think that we know it all, oh I've read that passage before, or to allow bible reading to slip in the list of priorities as to how we spend our time. Babies do grow up, move from milk to 'slop' – very messy phase! – and onto solid food which nourishes them yet further and sustains them for longer, but they still need feeding. We still need feeding, regularly, from the word of God; and just as we recognise hunger pangs that tell us it's time for a meal, so we need to recognise those spiritual hunger pangs that tell us we've missed out on time with God, and then be prepared to do something about it.

There are many, many other things that could be said about being new creations, about being reconciled to God and therefore being agents of reconciliation in this world; about being Christ's ambassadors in this physical kingdom, about being a royal priesthood and all being equally able and free to approach God, but time requires me to just raise them as headings, or thoughts in your minds, so that when you read the passages for yourselves and discuss them in housegroups, there might be some guidance as to areas to look at.

I wanted to finish this morning by looking at the theme of the temporary nature of this life. Although the first thoughts that might jump to your minds on that topic may be like mine, to do with enduring hardships and persecutions, the first encounter we have with the concept in our readings is to do with things we consider good, even things that are from God.

1 Corinthians 13 comes in the middle of Paul talking at length about spiritual gifts and how they are applied. He doesn't negate their value but says that love is more important than any of them, and then he says that all of these gifts will eventually, in time, pass. That when we see Jesus clearly – when he comes again – there will be no need for these spiritual gifts; for these flashes of insight and interaction between the spiritual world and the physical world because, once again, the two will be fully one. Creation will be as God intended it to be. What remains will be love. We will meet him in whom we have faith, we will receive the fulfilment of that in which we have hoped, but we shall live in love, forever, with him who loves us.

I found this intriguing because, as I say, we often focus on the temporary nature of this world when struggling to understand and deal with matters of persecution. We want things that are difficult to pass, and to hurry up and do so. And nothing wrong in that – the pain and suffering of this world is not as God intends us to live and is something that will pass with the completion of the coming of his kingdom.

Incidentally, while I'm on the subject of persecution, we are the body of Christ. When one part of the body is persecuted, we are all persecuted. When one part of the family is suffering we should all stand alongside and share in that suffering. Just because we as Christians in the west have relative freedom in our worship and living, doesn't mean we should be indifferent to the pain that our brothers and sisters in other countries are experiencing. We need to stand with them because ultimately what affects them affects us – we are **one** body. And so we need to give our prayers, our money, our voice, our political pressure. Not counting the cost, because it's costing them a lot more as they bear the brunt of the world's hatred for Christ at this present time.

But, as I say, Paul brings us the idea of focussing on that which is eternal when he talks about spiritual gifts that will pass. Not just the things that we struggle with, but that which is good as well. Everything we know, both good and bad, will pass when Jesus comes again, and will be replaced by that which is indescribably better.

We get glimpses of heaven in this world. We can see the beauty, the intricacy, the majesty of creation. We recognise love in the look or touch of our loved ones. We are able to join together in worshipping God, turning our hearts to him, and we experience those occasions where God speaks directly to us or acts through us.

But these are just glimpses, hints of that which is to come. We don't need to fear the bad in this world – it **will** pass – but neither should we cling onto the good so hard that we're in danger of causing that which is good to become a negative aspect of our lives.

A year or two ago the theme for Leading Edge was 'Travelling Light – living in the light of eternity'.

Let's leave this morning with lighter hearts and minds. Let go of the things that trouble and weigh you down. Let go of that tight hold on all the things that are important to you.

God knows what you need and he cares for you. He went to the effort and pain of Jesus' dying on the cross for you, so that you, so that we, can be reconciled with him. He can be trusted with the big picture, but he can be trusted with the day-to-day stuff as well.

Allow him to love you, and allow his love to flow through you to those you meet this week and beyond.

AMEN