1 Peter 1:17-23 26th April 2020 3rd Sunday of Easter

It is the 3rd Sunday of Easter. We are still in lockdown and I have just read that over 20,000 people here in the UK have died of the Coronavirus. Many in our congregations are struggling with the isolation and the fear and worry of what lies ahead seems to come up in almost every conversation.

Fear is a powerful emotion and it can rule our hearts and minds, effecting almost every part of our lives.

I have chosen today’s reading of 1 Peter 1:17-23 from the lectionary as it speaks into a time of fear.

St Peter was probably in Rome at the time, and his letter is to a group of young churches that were dispersed over a wide region of modern-day Turkey. It seems that those churches were under persecution of both verbal abuse and discrimination. There may even have been some who were suffering physically for their faith, and this all goes to creating an environment of fear.

But Peter’s approach to the problem is surprising. He does not call them to pray to the Lord to take the source of their discomfort away, or to stop the persecution so that the world around them becomes ‘nice’ again. No, Peter points them to the Lord and calls them to live in the hope to which they trust.

At the start of his letter, Peter has reminded them that they have been “born again into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

It is a wonderfully strong message, but it does not seem very helpful to those who were suffering in the here and now. The future is all well and good, but they were afraid in their present situation.

But as Peter continues, we reach the point in the letter of our set reading, and it becomes clear that all Christians are given a hope that does endure, and makes sense in the hardest of situations.

He calls them to be holy. They are to prepare their minds for action, and the action is to put their hope and trust in the grace of God. And then he explains:

I am going to paraphrase his message here:

*You Christians, you are to be obedient children of your heavenly Father. At one time your lives were completely in line with the ways of this world. You put your trust in power and might, in clever arguments and the people who would promise you all sorts of things. But at the first sign of trouble, they would let you down. You, and the people around you, would do all you could to make your lives better for yourselves, by whatever means, because this present time is all that you could see and trust in. You were ignorant of the truth.*

*But now you have a different understanding because God who loved you and called you before you were born, He is holy. And you are to look to Him, your heavenly Father, to seek your meaning and purpose in life, so that you may be holy in all that you do. As well as that, because He is the one who rescued you from your shallow ignorance and your rebellion against the same one who created you and rescued you, you are to live a life that is honouring to Him out of thanksgiving.*

*You once chased after the things that you thought would bring you security, but now that you have had your eyes opened by the Holy Spirit, you can see that even the gold you trusted in, would over time become worn and lost. But the treasure you now have is eternally precious and was bought for you at the great cost of the blood of Christ.*

*Thinking on this will give you a sense of your worth to God. No one else could plan before the start of time to rescue you so that you can be in his adopted family and loved for ever more.*

*So, having understood that, the way you are to live is not in fear of what this world could do to you, but to live in fear of the disapproval of our loving heavenly Father. Fixing your faith and hope in God, whose Holy Spirit called you to a new life in Christ. This is the certainty and security that you long for.*

*And having understood where your eternal hope and safety lie, where your love for our heavenly Father is made complete, then, even in the face of trials you are to live the life of Holiness and obedience to the truth.*

Those are my words, but they reflect the thrust of the passage. St Peter has focused the whole purpose of their lives upon the love of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit.

And our passage concludes with Peter’s direction for our lives. With these 2 verses:

**22**Having purified your souls

by your obedience to the truth

for a sincere brotherly love,

love one another earnestly from a pure heart,

**23**since you have been born again,

not of perishable seed but of imperishable,

through the living and abiding word of God;

He takes Jesus’ summary of the Law, love God and love your neighbour, as the basis for the way we are to love our fellow brothers and sisters. Having loved God by being obedient to His truth, we are to love one another.

But how do we do that? As we are freed from the sin that alienates us from God and those around us, our capacity to love the Lord grows, and that in turn expands our capacity to love one another.

Peter, in these final verses describes four important aspects of that love.

*Love more Purely:* As our self-absorption diminishes, our minds are more and more shaped by Christ and we look to those around us with his concerns and interests.

*Love more sincerely:* We are able to love with deep and genuine motives that are not put on, but come truly from the well of God’s love in us.

*Love more fervently:* We love not sparingly, but with a warmth that is given generously and sacrificially.

*Love more thoroughly:* A love that comes from a heart that treasures our brothers and sisters. Where our hearts and prayers are perpetually turned towards them.

In writing this, I have been deeply challenged in many ways. It calls on us to guard our hearts from growing cold and disinterested in others. We are to guard our minds from those bitter thoughts about others, and we are to guard our tongues against speaking destructive thoughts to or about them.

It is so very easy to become so caught up in the doing of everyday stuff and distracted by the worry of the uncertainties around us, that we lose sight of what is important: to hold our heavenly Father as the one we most cherish and love, and to live lives that are obedient and worthy of Him. And as we do so, then our capacity to love others grows.

With this mindset, it means that in times of fear, we do not look inwardly and become more self-centred, afraid to lose those things that superficially support us, in this world. No, it allows us to keep our minds on the things of heaven, and so without fear, we can live for others and to the glory of God.

Peter, in the follow-on verses, points the reader to the living word of God, the scriptures, for our instruction in this. For he tells us that the word of God is imperishable and abides always, it is like a precious seed.

Fear does not have to be the dominant thing controlling our lives in this world. So, in this season of isolation, let us use this time to reflect on these things, to let the seed of the Lord grow richly in us. And as we come out of the lockdown we will find that we have grown in our love of the lord and learnt how to love our brothers and sisters more.

**Amen**