

Sermon Park Road Baptist Church Sunday 7th February 2021

Read 1 Peter 5:1 – 11

I wonder if you have ever suffered from imposter-syndrome? I certainly have, but don't worry it isn't quite as bad as it sounds. Imposter syndrome is when you find yourself in a situation that you're not qualified for and so you feel totally out of your depth. You think to yourself that you really shouldn't be here. You look around at everyone else and you just feel so out of place.

You may know that I occasionally enter long distance running races – which could be 30, 40 or 50 miles. Before the start of the race as we all gather for registration, I find myself looking around and thinking what am I doing here? Because I see all these super fit people who are half my age, and I can easily start to feel like a complete imposter – like I really shouldn't be here.

I rather suspect that Peter knew all about imposter syndrome.

If you look at the start of this letter you will see that he is writing to advise churches across much of the known world. It is addressed to Christians scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus and Asia and Bithynia and Galatia and Cappadocia (which is modern day Turkey). So, Peter finds himself at the heart of something incredibly big and growing and wonderful.

But isn't this Peter, the uneducated fisherman? Isn't this Peter the disciple who so often got things wrong – most memorably when he denied any association with Jesus all together?

As he picks up his pen to write this letter to fellow believers who are scattered far and wide, I wonder if he had a touch of imposter syndrome – I wonder if he looked at himself and thought who am I to advise God's people on how they should live? Perhaps he had to pinch himself.

Imposter syndrome or not, Peter is well placed to help us as we journey with God today. He is no longer the young, impetuous disciple that we read about in the gospel's. He is now an elderly man and I suspect that over the years Peter has been on quite a journey spiritually and emotionally and along the way he has learned many important lessons about what it means to live for God.

I think one of the most undervalued and under used gifts to the church are those who have followed Jesus for decades. They may not be able to physically serve God in the way they did in days gone by, but they are a treasure trove of wisdom and insight and practical advice from whom we can all learn so much. One of the

things I value so much is being able to spend time with those who have walked with God for 60 or 70 years. For me, that is a privilege, and I often find it to be a very humbling experience.

Peter is now well advanced in years and he can no longer travel extensively and plant churches like he did years ago but he can pick up his pen and write a letter – aren't we glad he did!

So, what can we learn from this elderly statesman of the faith?

1. Be willing – that's in verses 2 - 3.

'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.'

Peter is clearly addressing the elders who have been given the responsibility of overseeing the churches, but I think we can apply this more broadly to include any act of service.

If God whispers into your heart that he wants you to do something – then, as the Nike slogan says, 'just do it'. During this time of lockdown, it could be to make that encouraging phone call, or to pray for someone over the phone or support your local foodbank etc. etc. etc.

In whatever capacity we find ourselves serving God – Peter says do it because you are willing and not because you must.

Think about Isaiah standing in the temple with the ground shaking beneath his feet and the clouds swirling all around and he says, **'here I am, Lord. Send me.'**

Or think about Mary, terrified by the visit of the angel who tells her that she will have the unique yet disturbing role of bearing the Messiah, **'well, Lord let it be to me as you have said.'**

Or think about Peter in an earlier part of his life. **'Jesus, you tell me to get out of the boat and walk on water and I'll do it Lord.'**

Attitude is so important when it comes to serving God. When we do things willingly, we experience something of the joy of the Lord or as Eric Liddle famously said, 'when I run, I feel His pleasure.'

But if we serve God reluctantly or grudgingly then we miss out on that blessing.

It's often been said that God is not so concerned with our ability as he is with our availability – how true that is.

Peter reminds us that we are to serve God willingly and not because we must.

2. Be humble – that's in verses 4 - 5.

If it came to a competition about spiritual experiences, then Peter could run rings round all the people who would ever read this letter.

He had been there from the beginning. He witnessed the miracles – water being turned into wine, a boy's packed lunch feeding almost 10,000 people, he saw the blind being given their sight and the lame walking. He was there on the mount of transfiguration when Jesus shone like the sun in all its brilliance. He was an eye-witness to the risen Christ and saw 3000 people turn to Jesus as he preached on the day of Pentecost. If anyone had reason to be proud and think they were in some way superior to others, it was Peter. And yet astonishingly, in v1 he describes himself simply as a fellow elder.

There's no pecking order here. Peter doesn't pull rank. In fact, in verses 2 – 4 he says that he and they shouldn't even see themselves as shepherds but under-shepherds, serving under the authority of Christ.

What a thing for Peter to say, especially when we recall that he was given a special commission by Jesus at the end of John's gospel to be a shepherd of God's people. And yet he just lumps himself in with everyone else as a fellow elder.

In verse 5 he says, **'all of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another.'**

In verse 6 he says, **'humble yourselves under God's mighty hand.'**

Humility is not something that is natural for us, but it is something we can cultivate. I wonder if having his feet washed by Jesus played a big part in cultivating Peter's humility, despite his initial resistance.

3. Be alert – that's in verse 8.

So, we are to be willing, we are to be humble and thirdly, Peter says, be alert. V8, **'Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.'**

This is a call to spiritual vigilance. The kind of temptations that were being faced by the Christians were to do with suffering - which could lead to some denying their Lord and giving up on their faith.

The devil is real and like the lion he is an opportunistic hunter. He will pounce when we are weak or vulnerable or separated from the flock.

Why do you think Peter put so much emphasis on being alert?

Probably because it was Peter who messed up so badly. It was Peter who thought he was so strong and courageous and yet he flatly denied any association with Jesus whatsoever.

Peter knew only too well what it was to fall away from Jesus. And the reason that many Christians fall away from Jesus today is because they fail to be alert. It's often been said that the one temptation that is most likely to trip us up is the one temptation that we think we are immune.

Peter fell away from Jesus when he was on his own, away from the other disciples. We know that lions, like most big cats, attack the animal that has strayed from the herd. It's so important that we maintain Christian fellowship and commit ourselves to the corporate worship of the church – don't give the devil a foothold.

Peter is clearly writing from his own personal experience – and he says, be willing, be humble, be alert.

4. And finally, he says, be hopeful – that's in verse 10.

As Peter writes this letter, the emperor Nero was in power and Christians were being murdered for entertainment and sport.

As a Christian, your life could be taken from you at a minute's notice. Peter is fully aware of this although he skirts round it a little bit in verse 10 when he says, **'after you have suffered a little'**.

But look how he follows that up, **'after you have suffered a little, he will restore you, he will strengthen you, he will make you firm and steadfast.'**

Every commentator I've read understands this to be a future reference to when we are taken to be with Christ in glory when there will be no more tears and suffering and death.

That is the glorious hope of every Christian.

However, I want to tentatively suggest that this verse also applies to the here and now.

Many of us have suffered and continue to suffer as a result of Covid – 19 and for other reasons as well, but with God, suffering never has the last word.

It is often through the furnace of suffering that God does his best work in us and so I suggest that verse 10 is a promise of hope not only for the future but also for those who are struggling today.

‘After you have suffered a little, he will restore you, he will strengthen you, he will make you firm and steadfast.’

In summary, Peter says:

Be willing.

Be humble.

Be alert.

And be hopeful.