

## **Small miracles: 1 Peter 1.1-12**

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you — you who are kept by the power of God through faith for the salvation which is ready to be revealed in the last time.**



**I've been watching a small miracle taking place in my back garden over the past few days. All through this long, cold, dry April, I've been putting out sunflower seeds for the birds, and noticed a busy robin flying in as soon as the food appears, scooping up a mouthful and dashing off to the bushes at the bottom of the garden. Obviously got a nest, I guessed, so I added mealworms to the mix — which disappeared mighty fast. Sure enough, last week I spotted him (or her) force-feeding a very large baby robin in the bushes, who soon followed Dad to the bird-table. Next day there were three nestlings hopping around the patio, being energetically fed by both parents before dashing off back to the bushes to take cover. A small miracle of new life, even in a very cold spring!**

**Watching this little family made me wonder: how on earth do the parents keep track of their little ones, once they leave the nest? Clearly they're not quite independent yet — they still need looking after. But they don't stay still! — they're too busy exploring their new exciting world. Somehow the family must work out its own ways of keeping safe and keeping in touch — even when they're scattered to the four winds.**



Today we start a new set of TFTD readings from the First Epistle of Peter. You'll find it towards the end of the New Testament (between James and John), in a section that's sometimes called the "Catholic Epistles" — "catholic" meaning "general, universal" (as it does when we talk about "the holy catholic church" in the Creeds). In other words, this letter, like Ephesians, is a circular letter, written to a whole bunch of churches up on the northern coasts of Asia Minor (part of Turkey today). The letter was sent to the regions listed in the first verse: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia — probably to tiny groups of newly-hatched Christians, scattered over a huge area. Being "scattered" is part of who they are.

So who were these Christians? The author addresses them as "exiles of the Dispersion (diaspora)", scattered to the four winds. Later in the letter, they're described as "living in exile" (1.15) and as "strangers and sojourners" (2.11). That ties in with the experience of the Jewish people down the ages, living a scattered "diaspora" existence but still keeping in touch with their own traditions and their worldwide family. Bible stories like Daniel, Esther and Joseph all tell the stories of Diaspora communities, living in exile but remaining faithful to God. But it isn't only Jews who have this experience. Every city in the Roman world contained a migrant population of mobile craftsmen and traders who paid taxes and contributed to the economy of the city but didn't have voting rights in the cities where they lived. They might have been there for generations, but in the eyes of the citizens, they didn't quite

**“belong”. (In the ancient city, slaves and women didn’t have any political rights either — ancient ideas of democracy were rather limited!) And of course that ties in with the experience of millions of migrants across the world today — whether they’re political refugees, economic migrants, or people forced to leave their homes by war or climate change. So this letter ties in the Christian experience with a “diasporic” way of life that is pretty much a universal experience.**



I've just read a book called *Pilgrims and Priests* by the Dutch theologian Stefan Paas (SCM 2019). He argues that 1 Peter is a really important letter for western Christians to read today because the experience of the church in western Europe is becoming more and more "diasporic", living in a secularized culture that doesn't necessarily share our values. The two most pressing issues for "diasporic" communities, he suggests, are loss of power — not being in control — and loss of identity. This is where we can learn from looking at the experience of other scattered communities and how they survive. This is what he says (p.154):

**“As a minority you can only keep your identity if you are willing to invest in it. You must be prepared to make the effort to keep your children rooted in your traditions, and you must spend energy maintaining habits and rituals like churchgoing and family meals. After all, if you do not shape your children with the Christian faith, others will shape them with the stories of the cultural majority.”**

But there's a danger in this too. It can lead to a kind of "ghettoization" where small communities feel threatened by the majority culture and become isolated and embattled. A church that feels "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through" is less likely to feel it have anything to offer to its neighbourhood and community.

This is where the Old Testament experience of exile has something to teach us. Joseph, Esther and Daniel all worked with the pagan empires where they lived to reveal something of the kingdom of God. In doing so, they learnt that God is not just "our God" — he is the God of the whole world. Jeremiah told the exiles to pray and work for the good of the city where they lived — even if it treated them as strangers. What the church needs, says Stefan Paas, is to present ourselves as a friendly 'tribe' with its own language — a language which has something unique to offer — joined with a hospitable culture and service to society. As we read through 1 Peter, we'll find that the

churches it addresses are pulled between these two poles of oddness (difference) and hospitality (open-ness).

As John and Charles Wesley discovered, hymns are a great way of binding a threatened species together and helping them to grow into their distinctive language. The first chapter of 1 Peter is an explosion of blessing, weaving together the big ideas of the Christian faith into an intricately-patterned carpet of interwoven themes. Think of it as a hymn in four verses:

Verse 1 (vv.3-5) is about HOPE. It all begins with God's mercy and God's action in raising Jesus from the dead. Easter is the start of everything. Cross and resurrection are two sides of the same coin. Without the cross, the resurrection would be meaningless: but our faith doesn't stop at Good Friday. Christian faith is built on the life-giving power of God, expressed in new birth, a living hope, and an eternal inheritance. The one thing you didn't have if you were a "sojourner" is property rights: you couldn't own land, you were always vulnerable to being 'moved on'. Don't worry, 1 Peter says: you do have property rights, safely out of reach of attack, kept safe for you by God in heaven. You don't have to worry about preserving your heritage: everything that matters about you is "kept by the power of God".

In verse 2 (vv.6-7) the focus shifts to JOY. If the Christian is "preserved" we should think not so much of a pickle as of a seed: a living organism, protected by its hard shell against frost or drought, but ready to spring into new leaf as soon as spring appears. So this secret life is a life of "rejoicing" (v.6) bubbling away inside, even though conditions outside are hard.

Verse 3 (vv.8-9) focuses on LOVE. The real motivating power of Christian hope and joy is love — love of a person they have never seen, but whose presence is enough to inspire faith and 'unutterable and exalted joy'. The focus of our faith is not a theory but a real person,

**present with us just when life's challenges are most demanding.**



Finally, verse 4 (vv.10-12) looks back into the past, to the promises of scripture. For 1 Peter, the Bible wasn't stuck in the past: it was a letter written for us, a glorious quarry full of material that reaches across the generations, waiting to be used for building up our faith. That's something to look out for as we read through the letter: how the author uses key "memory texts" from scripture to build up and nourish the faith of these newly-hatched "small miracles" in difficult times. We don't have to invent everything anew for ourselves — we have good friends and companions, fellow-pilgrims who have trodden this way before us. Not a bad thought to start the week!

God bless,  
Loveday

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