**Sermon Sunday 24th April 2022 at Stowe**

2 Peter 1: 1-11

Introduction to 2 Peter

If you were to say to me, ‘I don’t know much about Peter’s second letter’, I wouldn’t be at all surprised. It is one of the least known books – letters – in the NT.

So let me offer you a brief introduction to a letter that almost didn’t make it into the canon of Scripture (it took until the 4th century). A letter, incidentally, that bears a remarkable similarity to the letter of Jude – but we don’t have time to unpack that this morning. And then we will take a look at the first 11 verses of the letter.

Pray.

Today we start a series entitled ‘Encouragement when church teaching is confusing’. I’m hoping to encourage you, and hoping not to confuse you. You’ll have to tell me afterwards if I succeeded in either or both… May I encourage you, when you get home this morning, to read through the whole of 2 Peter – it took me 10 minutes. You will then understand better the sermons coming up in this series.

There has long been doubt that Peter actually wrote this second letter, because the style and language are so different from his first. There is no mention of the Passion, the Resurrection or Ascension of Jesus; no mention of the Holy Spirit, prayer or baptism – all of which figure very largely in his first letter. Someone remarked that it is the only NT letter that is improved in translation, which is in itself quite a damning criticism of the style of Greek in which it is written.

It is also undoubtedly a late book, given its contents. It quotes Paul’s letters, which were not collected and available at least until 90AD; and he quotes from John’s gospel, not written until 100AD. No reference is made in any other literature to 2 Peter until the 3rd century. It must have been at least the middle of the 2nd century that it was written, surely long after Peter had died. It is indeed the last letter in the NT to have been written.

So how do we explain his name on the cover? Think for a moment of Plato’s letters. Many were not actually written by Plato but by his followers, in Plato’s name. This was a common practice of the time. Between the Old and New Testaments, to take another example, books were written in the name of Solomon, Enoch, Moses and so on. And this was quite standard practice.

The point of writing this letter was to address an important current issue ***as if*** Peter were addressing it. A later follower of Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write a firm letter to churches ***as if*** it had come from Peter. And, perhaps out of humility, or perhaps because they felt it would be better received and have more authority, they attached Peter’s name to the letter rather than theirs.

OK, enough history. Why was the letter written? What was the big issue of the day that needed addressing? We know that 1 Peter was written to warn the church about the enemy without; 2 Peter is warning of the enemy within.

Not for the first time, there were around at that time people who wanted to disrupt the embryo early church. There were those who wanted to introduce teaching which was not what Jesus taught, for whatever reason. They twist Scripture to make it suit their own purposes. They bring the Christian faith into disrepute. They are covetous of money and exploiters of their fellow-men. They are ruled by brute instincts and dominated by their lusts. They are presumptuous, self-willed and arrogant. They speak of liberty but turn it into unbridled licence. They deny that the Second Coming would ever happen.

That’s quite a list! But you get the picture of the kind of people who we’re talking about – and these false teachers were getting into the churches and corrupting morals and teachings.

The way the writer approaches this problem is not to rush in and start berating these false teachers, but rather to begin, simply and clearly, to state very clearly what the right teaching is. So chapter one sets out the true gospel and what it means for the Christian. It seeks to make sure that every Christian is completely, 100% certain of their own salvation only by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

So in v1 there is a clear statement that all Christians have an equal inheritance through the grace of God. ‘You have received a faith as precious as ours.’ Barclay translates this as ‘you have been allotted a faith equal in honour and privilege with our own.’ The Greek word here is ISOTIMOS – ‘iso’ is equal and ‘timos’ is honour. The reference is almost certainly referring to Gentiles, who on becoming Christians receive, free of charge, a faith equal in honour and privilege. No distinction from the Jew who becomes a Christian. That was very important. Paul also addresses this point in Ephesians 2 ‘those who were far off have been brought near’ and again in Galatians ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’

Note that this privilege of faith had been allotted to them all. They had not earned it; it had fallen to them through no merit of their own. In other words, this is by God’s grace alone. We do well to note that in our own day.

Then the theme is further developed, clearly in contrast to the false teachings being propagated.

v3-4 we see a beautiful pen-picture of Jesus Christ, and real, encouragement for us. He is the Lord of Power. In him there is the divine power which can never be defeated or frustrated. He is the Lord of generosity. He bestows on us all things necessary for true life and true religion. He is the Lord of precious and great promises. That means whenever I read a promise in Scripture which starts ‘Whosoever…’ then I can say ‘That means me.’

And he is the Lord by whom we escape the world’s corruption. The false teachers we’re reading about were those who say ‘the grace of God is wide enough to cover every sin; so whatever I do can be forgiven and therefore I can do whatever I like.’ It’s as if such people want to sin and don’t care about sin. That’s not what Scripture teaches. We must learn to hate sin and seek to avoid it.

Finally he is the Lord who makes us sharers in the divine nature.

So because of this list of all that God has given us, what is our part in the story? For we have a part to play in God’s plan – not in our salvation, which God alone has won for us in Christ – but beyond that, what shall we do?

In v 5-7 Peter gives us a list of virtues – a kind of ‘ladder of virtues’, or a way to live better. Such lists as these were common at the time – because such lists were easier to memorise, in the day before writing was commonplace and books were both expensive and not readily available. So teachers would create these steps, one upon another, to aid memory.

The base of the ladder is faith in Jesus Christ. For Peter this was non-negotiable. It is the unquestioning certainty that the way to happiness and peace and strength on earth and in heaven was to accept Jesus at his word.

The first rung after faith is here translated goodness. It is the Greek word arête, a word very rarely used in the NT. It implies excellence; it could be translated virtue or even courage. It means an active, positive, efficient excellence. It is used about farmland to mean it is very fertile. It is used to describe the Greek gods’ mighty deeds. Arete is that virtue which will make you a good citizen and a good friend, that virtue that makes you an expert in the technique of living well. And the word includes an element of courage to enable you to live out your faith and not be afraid to talk about Jesus with those you meet.

The third rung on the ladder after faith and goodness is knowledge. Of the two words that could have been used here, Peter uses gnosis, which is that knowledge which enables you to decide rightly, and to act honourably and efficiently in the day-to-day circumstances of life.

Next after knowledge comes self-control. This means literally the ability to take a grip on yourself. This does not mean you have no passions, but that these passions are under control and so become your servants, rather than them mastering you.

Then there is steadfastness. That is, accepting and enduring all that life throws at us but always looking forward in hope. It is more than simple patience. The Greek is hupomene, best used in that verse in Hebrews which describes Jesus, ‘who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame…’ Not simply a shrug of the shoulders but a true steadfastness of character. Hupomene.

The next rung is godliness, coming from a Greek word that is apparently untranslatable. Piety doesn’t do it justice; it almost sounds weak. Some people have been described as ‘so heavenly minded they are no earthly good.’ That’s not the meaning here. This word carries the idea that looks in two directions; we look to God and correctly worship him and give him his due, while also correctly serving our fellow men and women and give them their due. Both/and.

Then comes what is called brotherly kindness, philadelphia. This follows on well from godliness, serving both God and each other. We live in two worlds, and we need to actually inhabit both. There may be a few who are called to be hermits for Christ, but most of us are here for the purpose of making known the good news of Jesus Christ to those we are in contact with.

And the final rung in the ladder is – perhaps obviously – Christian love, agape. We seek to love as widely as God has loved us, love which causes the sun to rise on the just and the unjust, and the rain to fall on the evil and the good. As Christians, we must show to the world the love which God has shown to us.

Peter also suggests we should possess these qualities in increasing measure in order to make us productive and effective in Kingdom work. Because that is why we are here, isn’t it?

So how are you doing in climbing this virtue ladder?

Read v5-8.

This is a very high standard, and we know we fail at times. All of us. Yet it’s like learning to ride a horse. If you fall off, get on again. This is a life-long journey we are on. There will be problems on the way. But stick at it, so that at the end we may hear those comforting and reassuring words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’