

## **Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: March/April Notes**

**First Letter of Peter:** There is universal agreement that this is one of the favourite pieces of New Testament writing...and much quoted. There is some dispute about who wrote it and when. However, a reasonable view is that it was written by Peter in around AD 67, to Gentile Christians in Asia Minor churches. The background was persecution of Christians, initially in Rome and then in other parts of the Roman Empire to which Christians fled from Rome to join local Christians. The immediate background was severe fire in Rome, for which Emperor Nero was (probably justly blamed) since he wanted to mount a grandiose re-building project. Nero tried (quite successfully) to switch the blame to the Christians of Rome; and had them burnt alive, torn apart, crucified, etc, as a public spectacle. [If you think being a Christian today is sometimes challenging.....!] It was around this time that the Roman authorities began to distinguish non-tolerated Christianity from tolerated Judaism – supported by rumours about the Eucharist/Holy Communion being cannibalism and an orgy (love feast). Christians were also accused of breaking up families... in a way that the gross immorality of the time apparently didn't break them up.

One other important (and very evident) bit of background: Christians at this time were fairly sure that they were living in “the end times”: everything going up in flames (more reason to blame them for fires), and Jesus returning.

The letter is in excellent Greek – probably because Silvanus, a prominent disciple and companion to both Peter and Paul, and a well-educated Roman citizen, did the actual writing.

**March 17<sup>th</sup>: 1 Peter 1: Host Andy, Lead Brian:** Peter is never a religious bully: he does not take personal advantage of his position of authority; but he does “say it as he sees it”. In the Message Version, there are some powerful and memorable phrases: e.g. We have everything to live for. You never saw Him [Jesus], but you love Him. Total salvation. Roll up your sleeves. He won't let you get by with sloppy living. You know you have a future in God. Love one another as if your lives depended on it.

Sometimes, we are inclined to see the Salvation story as God responding; and we are certainly very much inclined to be impatient with God not responding on our timetable with our preferred solutions. Peter is saying to people with a death threat hanging over them: God in Jesus began the Salvation story when He began the Creation story, and He chooses to work in partnership with us on a timescale which we short-lived mortals find it hard to grasp. But we can and should, rejoicingly, make good use of our here and now: in good times and in bad. Our future is God's future; but so is our present.

Favourite passage(s)? How do we live in the present, for the future, learning from the past? How do we balance strategic living and living in the moment? (Always planning and never doing is not creative!) Can we give credit to those who live Godly lives without

formally acknowledging God? Can the outsider see both “How these Christians love one another” AND “How these Christians love me”? My commentary quotes the blind lamp-lighter feeling his way from lamp to lamp bringing on the light that he can’t himself see: lessons from this? {I remember seeing the lamp lighter at work in Glasgow many years ago.}

**March 24th: 2 Peter 2: Host Andy, Lead Evan:** Make a clean sweep. Living stones. Don’t indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life. Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. \treat everyone you meet with dignity. Respect the government. Hi wounds became your healing. Now you’re named and kept for good.

We matter. What we say matters. What we do matters. If the Roman Empire had 60 million slaves, that meant to the master class of the time that there were 60 million people who did NOT matter – even though many essential jobs were done by slaves. Christianity came along and said each and every one of us matters to God; and, if we matter to God, we ought to matter to each other. Matter infinitely. This message can be both hugely scary and hugely cheering to us. Scary, because we feel we can’t ever get it wrong. Cheering because we know that, despite our shortcomings, we are valued. It can make us a bit neurotic, unless we can grasp the idea of sinning saints. We won’t always get it right; we must always keep trying. One of those (many) occasions when selective use of Bible passages can talk up the failure sinning or the success sainting. We are human. God knows that: he has lived our humanity!

Does the living stone language help us grasp both individual responsibility and collective/partnership responsibility? How do we combine respect for government with challenge to government? (The Church gets criticised for interfering in politics – e.g. the PM criticised the Archbishop for praying for dead Argentinean troops as well as dead British troops during the Falklands War.) Jesus is praised for suffering in silence: Do we keep silent where someone else is suffering? Does “putting up with it” freeze our ability to fight back against injustice that affects us? Did the “Be good slaves” message delay the abolition of slavery, or was it the only realistic response at that time: along with “Be good masters”?

**March 31<sup>st</sup>: 1 Peter 3: Host Miranda, Lead Toyin:** What matters is not your outer appearance but your inner disposition. Treat your wives as equals. Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. You’ll be a blessing, and also get a blessing. Run after peace for all you’re worth. It’s better to suffer for doing good, than to be punished for doing bad. Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone.

Jewish and Roman and Greek traditions were more or less agreed on the “principle” that women had no rights, and men had absolute rights over their women. We are shocked by any indication in the epistles that women are not equal to men. The men and women at the time of Peter’s writing would have been shocked by the notion that they were in any way equal. We have come a long way – partly thanks to Peter and his colleagues; and with

a lot of thanks to Jesus Himself – who challenged so many conventions of His time. Equality be for God was a really challenging concept.

When does nice dressing become swanky dressing? Is Christian unity an optional extra, a nod to the possibility that there just might be other ways of doing things, or an essential for Christian witness? Does unity mean same way of doing things for all Christians? We have Open Communion. That is not true of all Churches. Difference between sympathy, empathy and compassion? Why should the righteous suffer? How would you “explain” Christ dying for our sins? Any thoughts on Jesus “descending into hell – the mysterious referenced in this chapter and in the creeds?

**April 1<sup>st</sup>: 1 Peter 4: Host Miranda, Lead Peta:** Learn to think like Him. Stay wide awake in prayer. Be generous with the different things God gave you. Take it in your stride.

Suffering sanctifies? Have we lost or gained now that infant baptism has mainly replaced adult baptism as our church’s norm... and of course no total immersion as a radical sign of radical change? (Some churches break the ice to baptise the baby!) Do we lose or gain from not expecting the end of the world to be just round the corner? (Even the JW’s have given up on predicting the date – though they still emphasise the eventual fact.) At the opposite end of the spectrum, how do you feel about those who want to extend their own mortal lives indefinitely? “Love hides a multitude of sins”???? (I’m thinking of the excuse making in the Andrew Lloyd Weber song “Love changes everything”.) Has hospitality become less of a universal obligation in our more selfish society? In some cultures, sharing your last crust with a stranger is still the norm. Preaching or practical service: which moves the heart more? How difficult is it to suffer for doing good?

**April 14<sup>th</sup>: 1 Peter 5: Host Miranda, Lead David:** I have a special concern for you church leaders. Be down to earth with each other. Don’t put on airs. Keep your guard up.

Silas (or Silvanus) is thought to be the actual scribe for this letter, as well as its carrier.

Note “Elders”, not Bishops etc. These are the early days of church organisation. The shepherd concept comes into play again – pastoral responsibilities. Different churches have different leadership structures. The Roman Church has a very hierarchical structure. But all Christian leaders need to follow the Jesus “Servant Leader” model. We are all in our own ways called to lead from time to time, in however humble a capacity. And if we are known to be Christians, we are inevitably seen as examples.

What qualities do we look for in a leader? On Maundy Thursday the Pope often washes the feet of prisoners.