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A three-part  
**Bible Study** on  
1 Peter and the  
theme of ministry

## A Community of the Homeless



Before starting this section, it might be useful to remind ourselves of what we learned last time about the communities addressed by 1 Peter.

### Read 1 Peter 1:1-2

<sup>1</sup> *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,*  
<sup>2</sup> *chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:*  
*May grace and peace be yours in abundance.*

Most ancient letters started with a greeting formula, which would state who was writing, and to whom. Such greetings can be very formulaic, although even in an age where few write regular letters, we know how the choice of language, or of a form of address, can convey a great deal. Have a look at **1 Thessalonians 1:1** to see how Paul starts one of his letters.

Peter is much more elaborate; perhaps the only bit that actually describes who his readers are is that list of regions or provinces. For the rest, every word is rich in associations, inviting them to see themselves in a whole new light, in a very different way from how

anyone would have addressed them in their daily experience.

As this opening already shows, 1 Peter is a text which does not work by careful argument but by the power of its images. Images appeal to the imagination: they do not tell you what to think but create spaces for thinking. The images or picture language of 1 Peter may be familiar to us, or they may feel quite alien. For the most part the ideas are drawn either from the contemporary experience of those who first received the letter, or from biblical passages that were well known to them. This is what creates the 'spaces for thinking': particular words or ideas may carry a whole repertoire of associated ideas, or they may provoke questions – 'so is it like...?' In this Bible study we shall attempt to recover the associations and questions that 1 Peter's language would have sparked.

However, although 1 Peter was written nearly two thousand years ago, some of its images, and the experiences of its readers, may feel very contemporary to us. These days we are constantly reminded of the power of slogans and of images, words or pictures, to shape our views of who we are and what we hope to be. In the political sphere we have been bombarded with the language of 'identity', 'control', 'boundaries', 'sovereignty'. At the same time,

we have also seen a ceaseless flow of other images, of those who are fleeing oppression or poverty; those who have no control and whose individual identities are easily forgotten in the pictures and numbers that fill our screens. Whether or not these two sets of images have happened in parallel by historical chance, they have been brought into intersection, one reinforcing the other. Words such as ‘migrants’ are no longer neutral, but in newspaper headlines are designed to remind us of who we are, and of who do not belong to us. The images have become images of ‘us’ and ‘them’, a mechanism for drawing lines of separation, at times policed by fear. Whatever we may feel about this, most of us gathered here belong to the ‘us’, looking over the fence or through the barbed wire at ‘them’. We know who we are, but they are deprived of identities, names, roles.

**Discuss the way** you have experienced some of the language and images of inclusion and exclusion, especially in recent months. You might want to find some pictures from recent events which reinforce the themes of belonging and control or of being alienated and without control over one’s destiny.

1 Peter addresses its readers as “exiles of the dispersion”. Regardless of whatever status and background in society they might have, the author demands that they all re-imagine themselves as **exiles**. The English translations vary, and other possibilities might be ‘aliens’, ‘strangers’, ‘temporary residents’, ‘sojourners’, ‘foreigners’, ‘pilgrims’, ‘immigrants’. Similar language is used at **2:11** (where a second term is added) and at **1:17** (**read these passages and compare different translations if you have access to them**). However translated, the terms imply those who do not belong, who do not have ‘settled status’; they are, or are asked to see themselves, as not the ‘us’ of society but the ‘them’. Such language may be inviting them to ask, where do they belong?

Later the letter paints for them a life where mockery, rejection, even punishment, are normal. **Look at 1 Peter 2:11-12, 18-20; 3:15-16, 4:3-4, 12-14; 5:6-9** and build a picture of their circumstances or their anxieties. In our passage, already at the beginning of the letter, the writer is asking them to embrace being the ‘outsiders’, those who do not belong – or being those who, because they belong somewhere else,

may be treated as a threat by those among whom they live. Regardless of social status and regardless of their place in these small communities they are united, one in being ‘nobodies’.

The language of **dispersion** (diaspora) or dispersal – scattered, away from home – strengthens the image. We might wonder, ‘from where have they been dispersed or made exiles’? In the Scriptures such language was deeply engrained in the formative memories of the people of God who had experienced exile from the land of Israel and Judah (see 2 Kings 25:8-12); they had had to learn how to live in exile, awaiting God’s future purposes for them (Jeremiah 29:4-14). It is not impossible that some of 1 Peter’s readers really were ‘displaced persons’: warfare and famine had driven people from their homes then as they do now. In later Christian thought, when the language of aliens or exiles was used, the emphasis was sometimes on Christians as exiles from their true home in heaven. But the congregations of 1 Peter would know very well what it meant day-to-day to be an ‘alien’, a ‘foreigner’, quickly viewed with suspicion, even as bearers of a world-wide conspiracy. For many Christians in parts of the world today this is still their experience. We should not turn such language into a sort of spiritual escapism which ignores the social realities around us.

To enter into that experience, we might take a large sheet of paper and write all the terms and ideas associated with the words we have explored. Which speaks most to each of us? What does it feel like to place ourselves in the midst of them, to identify with them, as 1 Peter is asking his readers to do. (See the diagram at the end of this document or Slide 2, printout 1).

#### Read 1 Peter 1:1-2 again

*<sup>1</sup> Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,  
To the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus,  
Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,  
<sup>2</sup> chosen according to the foreknowledge of  
God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to  
be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled  
with his blood:  
May grace and peace be yours in abundance.*

Yet as soon as they have recognised themselves or imagined themselves as dislocated from society, among the dispossessed, 1 Peter presents them with a veritable landslide of new images, new slogans: they discover that they are part of a new reality.

ii) At this point we are going to leave the introduction and move to the main passage which we shall concentrate on for the rest of this Bible Study.

### Read 1 Peter 2:1-11

*<sup>2.1</sup> Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—<sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. <sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup> like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." <sup>7</sup> To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," <sup>8</sup> and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. <sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.*

This is a very dense and rich passage, and at first sight it may be difficult to follow. Reading it is like

studying a tapestry, or a North American quilt, or a stained-glass window; the individual components each tell their own story, and rightly capture our imagination. But if we concentrate only on the individual components one by one, we shall miss the effect of the whole, of how they dance in relation to each other.

**1.** Notice how in verses 1-5 the author moves to command and encouragement. Then, in verses 9-10 the commands are replaced by statements, "you are". All these are in the plural – everything said is addressed to them all together: not you over there, and you right here, and you to my left, and you because you look important, but 'you all'. Although each person must make their own response, this is for the community as a whole as they again re-imagine themselves in a new light. **Remember who 'you all' included in the audience of 1 Peter, and consider how such a corporate address might have felt.**

**2.** You are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people". We shall think further about each of these terms in the next session, but for now notice that they are all group terms; they emphasise a shared calling and a shared identity: a **nation**, bound together by the same ties and commitments; a **people**, or a **race**, sharing a common origin, a common DNA; a **priesthood** (we shall come back to this but the term is a corporate one, a collective of priests). Go back to verse 5, "into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood": a house, a building or a home, or the extended family that makes it a home.

Each of these terms is saying that you can only be what **you are**, not in virtue of who you are as individuals but as a single body. That does not mean that Christians are like the ranks of soldiers – all identical, in absolute step with each other. It does mean that our calling does not start from who **I am** and what God has done for **me**, but from who **we are** as those for whom God has **done great things** (verse 9). We are identified by a common purpose and calling. That is the starting point of the particular calling any individual may have.

**3** This is reinforced as the passage is all brought together in verse 10: **“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”**

Again, although it is not marked as such, this is quotation from Scripture. It draws on the hope of renewal that was offered to disobedient Israel

by the prophet Hosea (**read Hosea 1:6, 9; 2:25**). Although the readers of 1 Peter were probably not predominantly of Jewish descent, 1 Peter redirects this passage to them, contrasting both their status as Gentiles who had not been part of God’s story, and perhaps their status as ‘aliens’ (See Slide 3 and printout 2). **Discuss what this might have meant to them in the light of what we have discovered about their background.**



## Some **questions** to draw this part of the study together

- **What has been the effect of reading these passages against (i) what we have been able to recover of the communities to which 1 Peter was written, and (ii) some of the language of recent political and national debate?**
- **How does the Church offer a sense of belonging to all who are a part of it, and to those in society who feel that they do not belong?**
- **How conscious are we of being part of God’s story with God’s people?**
- **In what ways might our study so far offer a foundation for continuing to think about ministry?**

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