

NEAC Bible Reading
Friday 19 September at 7.30 pm

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The Context for Mission

Talk 1 Participating in the Divine Nature (2 Peter 1:1-10)

Sometimes the Holy Spirit impresses himself upon us in interesting ways. This happened to me with these Bible readings. Given the Congress themes, I was preparing work on 1 John. Yet in early summer as evangelicals united in a remarkable way, I felt God increasingly pointing me to 2 Peter which is surely a tract for our times. So I pray that God's Spirit will speak to us in his Scripture in a way that will challenge and encourage us all.

Like all our talks at this Congress these Bible readings are short so some quick general comments —

Some general comments

I *do* believe that this epistle was written by the apostle Peter from Rome to a group of churches mostly composed of converted Gentiles. It was probably written in the mid sixties just before he died a martyr at the hands of Nero. And here, I believe, Peter, knowing he is about to die, as he makes clear in 1:13-14, writes something not unlike a 'last will and testament', in which he stresses all that he believes is vital for these churches.

His main concern for these churches is with false teaching. So he examines these teachings and warns of the danger of judgment. Yet this is by no means a negative book. Peter's counter to false teaching touches on great areas of the glory of the Gospel which he begs his readers to recall continuously. He specially highlights four areas of great joy but also of great strategic value when confronted by falsehood. He speaks

- i) Of the joys of our salvation,
which must lead to a godly and virtuous life,*
- ii) Of the trustworthiness of Scripture;*
- iii) Of the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ and then*
- iv) Of Christ's certain return to Judge and to Save.*

I suppose it ought not to surprise us that all four of these areas are under attack in the church today as well. In an age when our behaviour is defined often in terms of our 'rights' or of what 'feels good', or 'seems natural', then the call for a godly life will be as deeply counter cultural for us as it was for the Hellenistic world in which Peter lived.

In an age of pluralism, the stress on the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ is also going to be subject to attack.

As in Peter's, so in our day, Scripture as God's truthful and utterly trustworthy Word is under attack. Of course, it is just another permutation really of Genesis 3:1 and Satan's question — "Did God really say?"

And that original question of course led to the next serious issue that men and women have sought to avoid or deny right through the ages — The coming of God to judge. Will Christ return? So Peter's epistle, speaking to the attacks on the faith in his day, speaks also to us who face attacks on the faith in all four of these areas. But it begins with Peter reminding his readers of the joys of salvation.

1. The joys of salvation — what we have received (1:1-4)

- a) Christians have received a precious faith —*
that is as precious as Peter's and the other apostles. (v 1)

Even though Peter was an apostle and a Jew, these Gentile Christians had **a faith as precious as ours**. 'Faith' here is not the body of doctrine that we might find in a Creed, but refers

to the believer's own commitment to the Lord Jesus. This commitment to Christ as God and Saviour, is given by God. The word **precious** is a wonderful description.

This faith is a gift that has come through the righteousness of Christ (v 1). This could refer to God's righteousness, meaning his fairness and justice in giving equal status to all people of faith, whether Jew or Gentile. But here, specially because of the emphasis on 'having received it', I think it more likely refers to the righteousness by which God puts people right with himself. We sometimes call this 'imputed' righteousness, a righteousness credited by God to our account so that we may be declared 'not guilty' before his judgment throne.

As Christians face the challenges of false teachers in their midst then the first thing to recall is the joy of salvation. Peter's comments here are more than simply nice opening comments, they are context setting reminders. They are vital reminders that in our context where attacks on the truth, on Christ, on our desire to live holy lives, abound, we still have a most precious faith that is as precious and of the same status as the faith the apostles themselves had obtained. But more than that, among the joys of salvation to be recalled

b) *Christians have received a powerful gift from him*

Peter tells us in v 3 that his divine power has given us

“everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness”.

Verses 2 and 3 are closely linked and Peter seems to have directly in mind *Jesus'* divine power by which he has given us all we need for life and godliness. And we have this, says Peter, “through our *knowledge* of him who called us”.

This introduces a theme that runs through the epistle, the theme of knowledge. This knowledge is of course, *both* the intellectual grasp of who God and Jesus are and what they say and demand, *and* a personal experience of and commitment to our God and Saviour.

As Richard Bauckham says this knowledge is: “the fundamental Christian knowledge gained in conversion”.

But the sheer joy of what is said here can so easily be missed. Peter will remind us of the call to godliness and our temptation will be to say “but my desires even my nature lead me in another direction”. The **joy** is that by his grace, he has given us his own divine power to fulfil what he asks of us in every area of life and in our way of living.

Here is at least part of the answer to those even in the church who sit light to the clear ethical and life-style injunctions of Scripture. In my experience many who sit light to issues of justice, or of sexual behaviour, or of greed or of anger, do so not because they wish to disregard Scripture completely, but rather feel that talking of these things is a ‘turn off’ to people. Well, I guess these things often are a ‘turn off’ for we are all sinful and selfish. But when we preach the full Gospel in all its positive glory and joy that Peter shares with us here, we find that Jesus himself, who himself faced all our temptations, has given us his divine power precisely to cope with the life to which he has called us. Like Peter we should stress the joy of the power rather than the difficulty of the command, and that Gospel is truly attractive to people as God draws them to himself. Thirdly,

c) *Christians have received very great and precious promises (v 4)*

These are surely both the promises of God's overflowing grace and protection in the present but also of the eternal kingdom in the future to which v 11 refers —

there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Later Peter affirms, against the false teachers, that Jesus will for certain return to judge and to save. So there is great joy in seeing again how much we have received from our Lord. And what is all this for? Well,

2. The Goal before us (v 4b)—

so that through them (through receiving the fullness of God's promises) you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

so that you may become partakers of the divine nature. What a statement! Peter doesn't mean that we become God. Yet the phrase was probably chosen because it would have rung bells with his readers who had come from a pagan, dualistic background. Peter captures the attention by redefining ideas in the light of God's revelation. There is no sense here of any loss of distinction between the creator and his creatures as there was in Greek thought or as there is in New Age thinking today. Yet, Peter surely does indeed mean that we are to be and will be God-like, that we will reflect the person of Jesus in our lives. — partakers in the divine nature.

This will only be completed of course when we have escaped from the corruption of this world, but that it not to say this is simply a promise for the future. Peter is concerned that this staggering participation in the divine nature is to be seen in our lives today. We *already* share, by grace, in some of God's attributes in a very real sense. Christians are called to be 'holy'. Holiness is a characteristic of the divine nature. Yes, one day we will be perfected but growth in holiness is already to be visible in the life of the person who comes to the knowledge of the Lord. But Christians also share in God's immortality. They are not trapped in this world. They will inherit the eternal kingdom (v 11).

The appeal Peter makes, then, as he calls us to reflect on the joy of our salvation, is that we become and are to become partakers in the divine nature. Thus,

For this very reason, says Peter (v 5), there should be a proper Christian response even now

3. The Christian Response (v 5-10).

With Christ's divine power, we cannot give up in despair at this point. We can't say "it's alright for some but not for me".

God has given us the power

to lead an effective and productive life

and so not be 'ineffective or unfruitful' (v 8)

The list of virtues Peter gives here are not, I think, in any special order, except to say that the knowledge of God starts with faith and ends with the mark of the Christian --love.

And we are to chase after these with eagerness and effort (v 10) for they become evidence to us and to others that our call and election is sure, and they constantly remind us of the great day when we will be welcomed into the eternal kingdom.

Peter is setting up a distinction he'll develop in ch 2 —

The faithful will seek after God and will wish to respond in every area of their life to his grace and calling, but those who follow false teaching will end up with no such desire and make no such effort.

Peter's emphasis here in this list is one which we as evangelicals need to look at again in our age. How do we present ourselves to our world? As we talk of Christ, does the world see in us a people who share in that divine nature? What do they see of divine 'goodness' among us? It is disturbing but perhaps not unsurprising that people these days even in the church tend to assume that goodness really simply means being 'nice people'.

For some being loving is indistinguishable from being thought to be 'nice' by all. Yet, some of these attributes here are so incredibly countercultural in our age, just as in Peter's time, that there's no way people exercising them will always be seen as 'nice' by the standards of others. A call to 'self control', for example, will never go down well in this day and age, but it will reflect the divine nature. We only have to see how defensive some of our newspapers were this summer about the loutish behaviour of drunk English tourists to know that 'self control' is not a virtue our nation cherishes. And what about 'goodness'? I am sure I am not alone here in having seen people come to faith only to find they have within a few months, lost their job as they have refused

to lie or cheat or steal. They may not be popular, but their counter-cultural stand reflects God's goodness.

Perseverance is about a total and practical commitment to the sovereign Lord and Saviour even when we are suffering. This also speaks against the flow of our culture where the emphasis on pragmatism means that if something causes suffering, or isn't working or giving us good feelings we should change and move our position. But no matter how countercultural will be the life we live, it is the

remembrance of sin forgiven that will always form the background to our thinking.

Peter doesn't beat around the bush. If we don't respond with a reflection of the divine nature in this way then it is as if we were blind, but most importantly, it reflects the fact that we have forgotten Christ's saving work of forgiveness (v9). We have forgotten the cross and the cleansing of past sins. We have forgotten all that Peter has been rejoicing in earlier in the passage.

Peter's challenge, then, cannot and must not be missed for us in this day and age.

One of our problems, I believe, is our tendency nowadays to be a people who are often indistinguishable from the world, a people who have indeed forgotten the cross and the mercies of Christ and the joys of our salvation and therefore a people, who have often been unfaithful to the call to reflect the divine nature. Where once a legalistic pietism may have been an evangelical problem, now we easily ignore the call to a whole life response to God's salvation that reflects the divine nature.

So to summarise, this passage causes us to rejoice as we remember all that we have received in Christ, even to the extent that we participate in the divine nature. Our response, through the divine power we have been given, is to reflect that nature even now. And then one day we will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.