

1st June 2025, Reflection – Resurrection Living (4): 1 Peter 2:11-25 ‘Humble lives’

Some years ago, when our family was taking our summer holiday in the Gower peninsula, we decided to go kayaking in the bay near where we were staying. It was a sunny morning, and our children would have been 8 and 7 years old at the time. The kayaks were for two people, so my wife and daughter went in one, and my son and I went in the other. It all started well: we kayaked out about a quarter of a mile from the shore – still well within the bay – but then the wind started to get up. The clouds rolled in and within five minutes we were battling through driving rain and choppy water.

I started paddling as hard as I could straight towards the shore, with my increasingly frightened son in the front of the boat doing his best to help. For some minutes it appeared that we were making no progress, the shore just seemed to be getting further away. It had long since ceased being an exciting ‘experience’ to laugh about later, and I was starting to panic myself... we kept paddling as hard as we could but didn’t seem to be making any progress at all... and then, almost as quickly as it arose, the wind died, the rain stopped and suddenly we could see that we were getting closer to the shore.

Ten minutes later, we were back at the beach – with my wife and daughter’s kayak thankfully right alongside us. We still had half an hour left on the time we had paid for – but a quick look at my family’s faces told me that no-one wanted to paddle out again! We’d had enough for one day...

It is hard to paddle against the tide. We learnt that lesson the hard way on the shore of the Gower peninsula – but **it’s a day-to-day reality for followers of Jesus**. Most Christians live in situations where they are the minority, choosing a different path. It takes guts to keep going – it would be much easier to give up, to turn around and paddle with the current. But, like our experience in the kayak, if we’d done that, we would have been putting ourselves in greater danger – the tide was leading us away from shore, out into the deep sea.

This lovely letter of St. Peter was written to early Christians in precisely this situation. They were a tiny group swimming against a big pagan tide. They felt vulnerable, some were openly persecuted, they faced opposition for refusing to condone certain societal norms. Peter’s letter is designed to encourage them in two ways: first he wants to remind them of what a great prize is on offer for those who stay faithful to Christ. Over the last few weeks we’ve heard about our living hope, about the power of God’s word, about the community of believers being the place where God dwells. You have all this, Peter says, - don’t quit. It’s too precious to leave behind. You won’t find this kind of good news, this sort of hope, anywhere else.

Second, though he wants to give them some practical advice on how to keep going. What does day-to-day faithfulness look like? In this section of the letter, the last we’ll look at in our short series, he identifies three main challenges and how to overcome them. Think of them as three ripples, widening out in scope.

The first is personal, what’s going inside *here* (our heart): (v11) ‘Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your souls.’ **Our first battle is an internal one. We paddle against the tide of our natural inclinations.** Peter has already named them, at the start of this chapter: (v1) malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander. When people wrong us, we want to wrong them back. We look at our friends or neighbours and we want what they have. We feel tempted to tell little lies and half-truths to get what we want. And Peter is blunt: this kind of stuff wages war against your soul.

It’s pretty striking language, isn’t it? If we indulge these attitudes they weaken us from within. They’ll rot away our insides, so we won’t have strength to paddle against the tide. So cut them out. Don’t indulge them – as Peter says earlier, crave pure spiritual milk, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. Feed on stuff that tastes good, and you’ll keep yourself spiritually healthy and strong – which you’ll need for the next challenge.

The second ripple is wider – it's corporate, it's our day-to-day interactions with the world around us: (v12) 'Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they may accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.' **Not everybody likes good people** – in fact there's something in humanity that is suspicious of goodness, even resents it. 'Do-gooder' is usually a negative term, not a positive one – which is weird, when you think about it. But it starts young: the cool kids in the playground are the ones who smoke behind the bike sheds and are rude to teachers, not the quiet ones who look out for the kids who get bullied or put their rubbish in the bin.

Peter's advice, again, is very simple and direct: be good anyway. You never know the effect you might have. But you'll have to paddle hard against the tide. Your friends are gossiping about so-and-so and want you to join in: be good anyway. Your boss encourages you to overclaim your expenses because everybody else does it and the company makes lots of profit: be good anyway. Your neighbour is rude to the new family who've just moved to your street from another country and wants your approval: be good anyway.

Refusing to cheat people, or badmouth them, or take advantage of loopholes – it's the right thing to do, but even if you do it quietly, it shines a light on others. This is why we need to find our hope in the Lord, in our identity as beloved children of our Heavenly Father, in the loving friendship of Jesus. It's Jesus who is the true Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, as Peter puts it at the end of our text.

Finally, the widest ripple goes beyond the personal and the corporate to our life as citizens in society. And here we need to be clear about two things: first, the context and specific challenges the early Christians faced. And second, that we read Scripture as a whole to get a balanced view. The context here is that Christians refused to *worship* the Roman emperor. This not only put them at risk of a charge of treason and possible execution, but got them a name for being troublemakers, anti-authority. Having been labelled as such, the temptation was to take that further and disobey other laws. And Peter here is saying, don't do that. He knows that we can never worship another being but God, so he chooses his words carefully: 'honour' the emperor. Even if our earthly rulers are corrupt and self-serving, we can still obey the basic laws of society. If you get into trouble, make sure it's because you're doing right, not wrong. Our freedom in Christ is to do good, not evil.

We also need to remember that our relationship to society is complex. Peter's basic advice to obey the laws of the land does not mean that we obey anything that directly conflicts the word of God, or our life as a follower of Jesus. So, Peter does not say: worship the emperor. Other texts of the New Testament make it clear that our obedience to Christ is paramount, and that sometimes this puts us at odds with the law of the land. As Martin Luther King observed: "If any earthly institution or custom conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to oppose it. You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God." But our basic mindset is to be model citizens, doing good – and to disobey the law only if it directly conflicts with our calling to obey Christ.

As I wrap up, how are you paddling today? Where is it hard? Is it in your soul? Or in your community? Or in our society? Or maybe a bit of all three? This is real-life as a follower of Jesus, and in the last part of the text, Peter admits that there are times we will be treated unjustly. This is when our lives most closely resemble our Saviour, who suffered unjustly on our behalf. We all pray that those times never come for us – but if they do, Peter says, we know that One has been there before us. And those who face such times usually testify that those times are when they sense the presence, peace and help of Jesus most powerfully. That was true in my own life when I was unjustly treated – Psalm 37 was a great help to me, and I gained a deeper insight into the enormity of Christ's love for me.

'By his wounds we are healed.' It is hard to paddle against the tide – but **we can overcome because Christ overcame.** This same Christ empowers us to keep paddling, and reassures us of his love. We listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, calling us to him, calling us home. And may the Lord grant us grace to keep paddling, for his glory and in the power of his Spirit. Amen.