

May 3rd 2026, St Luke's

1 Peter 2:11-26, John 14:1-14, Acts 7:55-60

Peter is writing to Jewish background believers who had scattered from Rome because of persecution. They'd settled in various towns and cities in what is now Turkey. But suspicion and false accusations follow them, and they're feeling discouraged. 'Being right with God should bring good things; people would look up to Christians.' Where that didn't happen, they're wondering if they're on the wrong track. They were finding social dislocation too; some had never been outside Rome before. It's not so easy to adjust to new cultures and different social norms, as many of us will have experienced.

I made my first solo move at 17, when I left home for the big smoke of Wellington as a music student. For the first time ever, I was meeting people who hadn't known my whole family first! I enjoyed the freedom to be me, but it was also strangely disjointing. I tested the boundaries one day, by sitting down in the gutter in the Cuba St mall to do the naughtiest thing that came to mind. -I ate fish and chips out of newspaper! And I put a bottle of raspberry fizz handy on the kerb to wash it down! Back home, that would really have made waves. And on that chilly day in Wellington, no-one turned a hair. Less happily, I also for the first time met people in positions of authority who disparaged my Christianity. It was fashionable in the arts world then to look down your nose at 'organised religion.'

Whatever negative vibes I've experienced weren't a patch on what Peter's audience faced. They were in actual danger, but he tells them not to follow the impulse to strike back. He says they should live honourable lives, and if they suffer unjustly, they should not wish harm on one who hurt them. He reminds them how Jesus had responded to suffering, even on the cross.

But if the new settlers are living as good citizens, why are they so out of favour? It came down to Jesus's claim to unique standing as God the Son. Multi-gods weren't an option for them. For example, when they visited people's homes they didn't burn customary incense to the household gods at the entrance, as you do to be polite. As we heard in the John reading, Jesus claimed, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.' Those Old Testament terms; way, truth, and life were familiar to Jewish background believers.¹ There was only ever one way, one truth and one life. For them, spirituality wasn't a smorgasbord from which you could choose whatever you wanted.

Back in 2011, I met a family who were viewing faith choices for the first time. I have dual citizenship with NZ, and to get my Australian citizenship I had to pass a test. The migration officer had given me a study book from which a computer would choose twenty questions. When test day came, I joined a huddle of fellow-migrants nervously quizzing each other in the waiting room. Among them was an extended family, full of enthusiasm. They were doing the test on the very day they became eligible. It's a bit embarrassing, but having a white skin

¹ Ps 86:11, Ps 16:11, Ps 27:11, Isaiah 35

meant they considered me an expert. So they asked me, ‘It says here that in Australia you can be any religion. You can even change your religion. Is that true?’

I affirmed that was the right answer.

‘But it also says in the book that you’re allowed to have no religion. ‘That must be a mistake.’

‘No, it’s true. It’s the right answer,’ I said.

That was too much for them to believe. They were mumbling, ‘How can you possibly be a good citizen with no religion?’ (Mercifully, we didn’t get that question!)

I’m glad that Australia has separation of church and state. I’m also friendly with some atheists who live exemplary lives, but I think I understand the family’s concern;

If I didn’t believe in God, I would live by whatever yardstick I chose. Really, I would be casting myself in the role of God to sort right from wrong, if I even called them that.

Woe to anyone who tries to decide that for me! Logically, I wouldn’t believe the devil exists either. So the role of the devil, God’s enemy, is filled by my worst enemy. That sort of Ned Kelly path doesn’t end well, as we saw in country Victoria a month or so back. Fortunately, that was an unusually extreme case. But rather than asserting the claims of a life centred around ourselves, Peter suggests that the believers try a notably different approach.

You can eliminate your opponents by winning them over. He distinguishes the real, spiritual enemy from the behaviours of some challenging people who just don’t know yet that God loves them. I saw that principle at work when we studied World War II in secondary school. We watched an interview with a former British fighter pilot. When a question was asked about his forays against ‘the enemy,’ he corrected the interviewer, explaining ‘The German pilot was not one’s enemy. He was one’s opponent.’

Afterwards, we discussed the difference between the evil to be combatted and those caught up in it. Now, as then, the distinction doesn’t come naturally. There was a time-honoured blueprint for a first century Jew to follow under torture. You threatened your torturers with the dire punishments coming to them in the hereafter. Returning curse for curse was the brave, patriotic thing to do. And they did not lack courage!

But what did Jesus say on the cross? He didn’t curse the Roman soldiers, or the religious power-brokers behind them, or rebuke any of his own followers who had disowned him.

Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’²

And the effect? Luke tells us that the soldier in charge, who had likely overseen many such deaths, exclaimed, “Surely this was a righteous man.”³ By Matthew’s account, the other soldiers were also affected.⁴

What does Stephen shout out with his last strength, as rocks are flying at him and his body is being destroyed? ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’⁵

² Luke 23:34

³ Luke 23:47

⁴ Matt 27:54

⁵ Acts 7:60

It's an incredibly powerful response. Stephen focussed on God's glory, not at the hostile faces surrounding him.

Just occasionally, like Stephen, or Paul on the Emmaus road, or Peter at the Mount of Transfiguration, Christians may get a glimpse of God's glory. On a couple of occasions during my time as a hospice volunteer, I've known such a vision transform someone's nervous impending death into a confident one.

But previews of God's glory usually come in less dramatic ways; perhaps when seemingly impossible reconciliations occur between people, and change their whole environment. Peter leads us to think that with perseverance, and a little humility, we can infuse hope into our world. It previews the life to come. Jesus tells his disciples, 'I'm going ahead to prepare a place for you.' He speaks of many mansions in God's house - room for all of us, because of Jesus.

Greater minds than mine have pondered, 'Why the hard things in the meantime?'

I find heart in a poem called, 'the weaving.' It likens life to a tapestry, with God seeing the picture side, and we see seeing the messy threads on the back. The author is unknown, but it was often shared by Corrie ten Boom.

I quote from it;

'Not 'til the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly
will God unroll the canvas
and reveal the reason why
the dark threads are as needful
in the weaver's skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.'

May we grow in grace as we take our place in God's design, seeing past this world's troubles,
into the eternal kingdom. Amen