

Introduction to the Commentary

The transforming joy of Jesus Christ changes lives and communities. The First Letter of Peter is written to communities across Asia Minor who, sanctified by the Spirit, are called to witness to this transforming joy even as they suffer for the name of Christ. Written to a persecuted community, 1 Peter speaks of the struggle of early followers of Jesus to maintain their mission and sense of cohesion in the face of opposition (Elliott 1992, p. 274). The letter offers encouragement for unity over division and for humility over anxiety as it instructs those suffering for their faith in how to live faithfully in the time between Jesus' death and resurrection and his return. It addresses and encourages all who follow Christ, while also engaging specific issues faced by those members of the community who are enslaved, those who are exiles and resident aliens, those who live under human institutions of hierarchy and patriarchy and all who are called to welcome and love the stranger. Across the chapters of 1 Peter, the driving message for all is the transforming joy of

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faith in Jesus Christ and a call to witness, to hope and to holiness as God's chosen people.

This commentary draws together numerous voices from across the global church in preparation for the Lambeth Conference 2020, the gathering of all Anglican bishops from across the Anglican Communion that takes place once every 10–12 years. Over the course of five days and two meetings in London as well as countless emails and correspondence, faithful scholars from around the world gathered together for the St Augustine Seminar to spend time with 1 Peter and to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their engagement with Scripture. This commentary draws on the stories, struggles and prayers of scholars from six continents and represents a range of Christian traditions and experiences. The work from these gatherings is drawn together in what follows, where different approaches to Scripture are brought together in such a way that difference is not hidden, and the conversation continues. Our hope and prayer is that this commentary invites you and your community to continue this conversation and to experience the transforming love of Christ proclaimed in 1 Peter.

The tone of the commentary is intentionally conversational and even homiletical in places, offering a close reading of 1 Peter and drawing out a number of foundational themes for the Christian community as set forth by its apostolic author: hope, holiness, witness, suffering, joy, hospitality, exile, leadership,

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resurrection. Across this commentary these themes emerge time and again, with short excursions woven into each chapter to engage more deeply with the themes and with the text. The five chapters of the commentary mirror the five chapters of 1 Peter, though detailed notes are given in Chapters 2 and 3 for why the chapter divisions of 1 Peter (added after the letter was composed) are not always helpful. This is especially the case in 1 Peter 2 and 3, where the call to various sectors of the Church to ‘accept the authority of’ (2.13, 18; 3.1) belong together as Peter engages with what it means to acknowledge authority, to submit, to honour and how to return good for evil as a pattern that instructs all Christians in conformity to Christ.

The letter is written to those who are experiencing alienation and suffering. Nevertheless, the people addressed have not been forcibly displaced but rather are part of the diaspora because they have been called into communion by God and therefore separated from the world, and sometimes from their own social or political communities. This focus leads to a number of interpretations of the text – as the St Augustine Seminar encountered on a small scale – since some will immediately identify with the context of persecution and suffering, and others will not. Importantly, we cannot interpret someone else’s suffering for them. Peter’s letter not only offers encouragement for those living in difficult times, but also calls others to stand in solidarity with those

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who are suffering and not in judgement. The letter makes clear that those who are vulnerable don't always have the luxury of resisting oppression or stepping away from suffering, continually returning to the person of Christ and his rejection, unjust suffering and exaltation.

Themes of hope and of holiness are as central to this letter as those of suffering and offer mechanisms for remaining resilient in the face of suffering and, at times, resisting oppressive systems. This move can be found clearly in the strong outsider-insider language found in 1 Peter, where those who call themselves 'Christian' are considered both exiles and aliens, as well as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God's own people (2.9). The identity of exiles, of those excluded, of those who are suffering, as God's chosen people is subversive. God chose those who were homeless, those who did not belong, those who were deemed outsiders and strangers and made them God's own people, called to holiness. Thus, the text offers hope for those in ambiguous, difficult situations.

Reorientation as God's chosen, holy people doesn't necessarily lead to an escape from suffering, but it does mean that the powers that tried to control, that tried to dominate through fear, can no longer determine who and whose we are. Such a shift is modelled on Christ himself, the suffering servant (as 1 Peter, a letter deeply conversant with Hebrew scriptures, is clear). Hope comes not from the

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activities, postures or identities we generate on our own, it comes from our following Christ and participation in what God in Christ has initiated.

Accompanying this hope is an unfolding theology of holiness throughout 1 Peter which points to a faith that is dynamic and is deeply connected with the profound holiness of God into which readers are invited (Be holy for God is holy; 1 Peter 1.16). In the context of holiness and suffering, both of which are connected to God in Christ, 1 Peter raises issues for the Church today about how we engage with difference. Most significantly for those who are in communion with Christ, 1 Peter challenges all to reflect on the way we treat each other today and the way we have treated one another in the past. It calls for a transformed behaviour toward each other and the world, one which is focused more on coming together (being built up together as living stones; 1 Peter 2.4–5) than on disagreement. Living a life that is holy is not simply abstention from what is bad, but an imitation of God in the self-sacrificial movement toward the other, imitating God's movement toward us. And thus, 1 Peter speaks of redemption in the midst of conflict and the actions we are called to embody in our world in love.

Within this context, reading 1 Peter opens up a number of challenges for the Church today which are expanded upon throughout this commentary. Such challenges, which can inform our prayer and conversations, include:

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- 1 Peter is written to a people who are a minority, scattered in the world, which is an identity that characterizes the Christian life for the apostolic author and his readers: does this identity characterize the Christian life and mission for us today?
- As a letter addressed to people who are powerless, suffering and in situations where they have little choice, what does it mean to do right in those situations? What does it mean to imitate Christ in those situations?
- 1 Peter calls its readers to sanctify Christ as Lord (1 Peter 3.15), not the government (the emperor), not the master, not the husband. These three are introduced as ruling powers embedded within the ancient world, but 1 Peter asks: what might it look like if Jesus is Lord and not the emperor, master, husband?
- Power imbalances are real in 1 Peter and the world today and misuses of power are dangerous, especially when those in power are not always aware they are misusing it. This letter challenges abuse of power – cutting across place and titles, and including abuses that are physical, sexual, economic, authoritarian. Where have inequalities of power led to abuses in the past? Where do they continue to do so and how might all who exercise leadership and welcome continuously reflect on the power they hold?
- Knowing that fear can all too easily corrupt life together in Christ and imprison or further alienate

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individuals and peoples, what does it mean for a community of believers to live in hope and not in fear?

- One of the central challenges of the letter can be found in 1 Peter 3.15–16: how might you be ‘ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you’? What does it look like to live in a way that prompts such questions about Christian hope?
- When making a defence of hope in us, we must ask: what is the Church known for? In many parts of the world it is known for abuse, for in-fighting, or for disagreements about sexuality. Where is the Church glorifying God? What is the account that the Church and that followers of Jesus give for their hope and faith?
- The letter ends with a call to leadership, with Peter including himself among those who are elders in the Church, shepherding a given flock. Such images suggest that openness, fluidity, creativity cannot be detached from the suffering of God’s people and the glory that is to come. Where has our ministry lost creativity, openness and connection to those most vulnerable? Where is our ministry most creative and open to exploring new fields and pastures?

In the midst of these challenges, the call to holiness and to conform to Christ found throughout 1 Peter

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remains. And such a call forms the foundation for seeing this letter as a tapestry, where holiness and following Christ are woven together with joy, suffering, hope, witness and redemption, which we hope you will find in what follows. We encourage you as you encounter the text of 1 Peter to do so with a spirit of curiosity and openness as you seek to discover what the Holy Spirit might say and speak to you through this Scripture.

This commentary makes up part of the preparatory materials for the Lambeth Conference 2020. However, it is intended for all those who wish to engage in deeper biblical study of 1 Peter, as individuals and as a community. The voices within this commentary are many, emerging from days of dialogue and prayer together in November 2018 and May 2019. Immense gratitude is due to the St Augustine's Foundation – a registered charity that provides grants to support the work of theological education across the Anglican Communion – whose generous grant enabled the preparatory gatherings and production of these materials.

One of the great glories of the Anglican Communion – indeed, of the global church – is that we are sisters and brothers of different ages and backgrounds, spread across so many cultures and contexts. This brings great strength, but also means it is easy for us to misunderstand each other, often not because we are saying something different but because we say it in a different way. We found this at the St Augustine

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Seminar – we had to listen carefully to each other, to hear each other’s valuable insights when expressed in unfamiliar language. We expect that every reader will be disturbed at times by this book, as they read exegesis and interpretation which expresses an unfamiliar or even an unwelcome perspective. At those times, we would encourage you not to get frustrated or angry, but to pray that God would give you wisdom, insight and peace. Often God uses the stranger to reveal himself, his love and his purposes to us. As you encounter the text of 1 Peter, we pray that you may do so with a spirit of curiosity and openness as you seek to discover what the Holy Spirit might say and speak to you through this Scripture.