Elect Exiles
1 Peter 1:1-2

Imagine you've a friend who's interested in the Christian faith and they write to you asking your opinion: 'What is it? and if I embrace it, what will it mean for my life?' How would you respond? And in responding, you've got to get the length right, haven't you. Write too little, and your answer will be too superficial to help. Write too much and your friend may never get to the end.

So what would you write?

Well, over the next few months we're going to be looking at the first letter of Peter. A letter one commentator describes as '*the* most condensed resumé of the Christian faith and the conduct it inspires in the New Testament'[1]. In other words, no other New Testament letter says as much, about so much, in so few words, as this letter.

But look how Peter starts it: v1, 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.' And in the rest of verses 1 and 2, which is all we're looking at today, Peter describes the people he's writing to, and he packs a whole text-book of theology into one sentence. He says so much about them but so little about himself. Beware the leader who gets things round the other way.

And yet, despite that brevity, there's a whole back story to Peter calling himself *Peter*. A story of Jesus' power to transform a life. Because Peter was Simon, a Jewish fisherman, who would have forever remained unknown outside his family and friends if Jesus had not called him to follow.

And everyone else had their ideas of who Jesus was, but when Jesus asked his disciples, 'but who do you say I am?' It was Simon who replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." To which Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!… And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." (Matt 16:17-18). And that name *Peter,* Rock, stuck.

But Peter didn't just get a new name, but a new purpose: v1 again, 'Peter, *an apostle of Jesus Christ.'* And *apostle* means, 'one who is sent.' By definition, it's a subordinate role. Jesus is the sender, Peter's the sent. Jesus is the master, Peter's his representative.

But Jesus isn't any old master. Peter calls him Jesus *Christ*, Jesus the Messiah - Jesus God's long promised king over every king. And Jesus has sent him, Peter as his ambassador.

We're all ambassadors for something. Whether you recognise it or not, every day you and I go onto campus, or into the office, or sit at the table with the kids, we're carrying some message or other that we communicate to those around us. A message about what matters most in life; about how to see the world or where to put your hope. The only question is, what's the message?

And yet, Peter's an apostle in a unique sense, because Jesus made him one, and, with the other apostles, he was an eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And the message he and they carried was the foundation the church was built on. So what Peter writes here is not just another book like the last self-help book you picked up in the airport bookshop. It's authoritative, and it's binding. You see, Christianity is not like playing Mr Potato Head, it's apostolic, something delivered to us by Peter and the others, not something you get to make look like whatever you want.

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[1] Clowney

But it's not just that we get to read a letter by Peter, apostle and eyewitness, it's that he wrote this from Rome, around 63AD at the end of his life, the culmination of the wisdom he's learnt in 30+ years of walking with Christ.

But if that's who's writing, who's he writing to?

Verse 1 again: 'To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.' And from what comes later, the majority at least were gentile Christians. And the regions he names made up a large part of what's now modern-day Turkey. An area roughly equivalent to the size of much of France, Belgium, Switzerland and southern Germany combined. And yet, despite their multiple different ethnic backgrounds, these people have all come to faith in Christ.

The question is, why's Peter writing to them?

Living in a Hostile World

Have you ever been homesick? Maybe as a kid you were sent to summer camp and you cried yourself to sleep at night. Or maybe it's been moving here from and, as great as Switzerland is, it's not home. And you miss your friends, your family, your favourite food. And in particular you miss not feeling stupid at the Migros check-out because you don't speak the language.

Or maybe it's deeper. Maybe you feel like the odd-ball, that there's no-one who really gets you; nowhere you feel like an insider. And you wish there was somewhere you belonged.

Well, look again at how Peter describes the people he's writing to: v1, 'To those who are elect *exiles*.' And that word *exile* didn't just refer to people who had been literally, physically exiled. It referred to people who were non-citizens, foreigners or alien immigrants. And in Peter's day such people were legally unprotected. A subclass of people who didn't belong.

Which makes Peter calling these Christians *exiles* remarkable. Because while some of them were, literally, members of this subclass - like the bondservants he addresses later in the letter, others were almost certainly citizens, and they did belong and they weren't literal foreigners. And yet, he addresses them all as exiles. It's as if he's saying, 'I'm writing to you who are experiencing what it is to be away from home. Who belong, but know you don't belong, who are the sidelined in society.'

Why address them like that? For three reasons. Firstly, it's the way God's people have always thought about themselves.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament has Abraham using this same word for exile to describe himself: Genesis 23:4, "I am a sojourner and foreigner among you." I'm an exile. And so Peter's saying to them - 'to be a member of God's people, right back to Abraham, the father of faith, is to be an outsider.' It's why when the Writer of Hebrews reviews the heroes of faith, from Abel to Abraham, he uses the same word and says they all 'acknowledged that they were strangers *and exiles* on the earth.' (Heb 11:13).

On the earth. It's the second reason Peter calls them exiles, because if, like them, you're a Christian, this world isn't your home. Even though some of them were citizens, even though you or I might have position of status, ultimately, we're foreigners in the world, because we're citizens of another

country. As Augustine put it, we're citizens of the City of God living among the City of Man. And so if as a Christian you ever feel like you don't belong in the wider culture, it's because you don't.

But that fact of being an exile is going to have an impact on your life.

Have you ever considered why are there are specialised shops in Switzerland selling food specially for Americans to buy? Or why there are others where the British can buy Marmite? Or why, when the Dutch go back to the Flatlands, they return laden with stroopwafels and call all their friends over for a party? It's because we're foreigners, we're exiles, we're different, so we eat and behave differently.

And it's the same with God's people. We're foreigners in the world, so we behave differently to the world. We handle money, power, and prestige differently. We view sexual ethics and sexual identity differently. We only marry fellow members of God's people. And we behave differently because we are different. Or at least, we should be.

But it's that differentness that's the third reason Peter calls them exiles - because their differentness is causing them to experience the same kind of hostility literal foreigners would have experienced. And that hostility was increasing.

You see, having become Christians, Peter's friends no-longer engaged in the same kind of behaviours that their non-Christians friends, family or colleagues engaged in. And as a result they were facing growing criticism and suspicion. In all likelihood, some were being overlooked for jobs, and others were losing out on contracts because they wouldn't take part in the kind of pagan rituals that sealed them. They were, as one commentator puts it, increasingly 'out of step socially with their society.'[2] And soft persecution was rising.

And Peter's writing to encourage them to keep going. But not just endure but rejoice in the hope of what's to come.

You see, Peter knew by faith what we can learn from history. That ultimately God didn't turn the world upside down through political or cultural power. And the West wasn't won through a social or academic elite, or by these early Christians surrendering to the prevailing culture. Instead, God works, as he's always worked, through spiritual exiles. Through people who feel, and are treated like foreigners in their own nations.

Now, you don't have to be a Christian to face hostility or feel like an outsider because you're different. You can ascribe to plenty of causes that will guarantee you that kind of reaction. Where Christianity's unique is it claims to be exclusively true, but at the same time it gives you a deep love for those who are hostile to you. A love that ultimately conquered the empire. And it gives you that by giving you something we all need, but nothing else can give you.

You Need a Robust Identity

In his recent book, *From Strength to Strength*, Arthur C Brooks, professor at Harvard Business School, quotes the psychologist Carl Rogers as arguing that to be a well-balanced individual we always need an answer to the question, "Who am I?" That key to living life well is understanding your own identity.

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[2] Schreiner

And you don't have to look far for evidence of people searching for or defining themselves by a chosen identity, whether it's which side of the political divide you're on, or which letter describes you in the ever-increasing LGBTQ alliance, or your race or ethnicity.

The problem is, all of those identities either increase hostility and polarisation because they create an us versus them mentality, or they're unstable because someone can always out-victim you, or they're inadequate, because why would you define yourself on just one part of you, like your sexual attractions?

Instead, as Peter begins this letter, he wants them, and you and me to know that in a hostile world (then) and a polarised world (now) we can know an identity that nothing else can give.

Look again at v1: 'to those who are *elect* exiles'. It's almost an oxymoron, isn't it? Like military intelligence or a civil war. Because to be elect means you've been selected. But to be an exile means you've been rejected. And yet, the very reason this world is not their home, that they're exiles, is that God's chosen them. And if you're a Christian, the same is true for you. The reason you can feel out of place in our current culture is that in his grace, God has reached down and taken hold of your life, and chosen you.

And when life is hard or others are hostile, you need to know you're chosen, not abandoned.

But, you also need to know you're chosen by God's grace and not because your political views, or sexual ethics, or social engagement, or moral conduct are better than others. Because if you think that, it'll fuel your pride and with it your hostility to those who are hostile to you. That's not how Christianity conquered the empire.

Instead, when you know you're chosen by grace, rather than inflating your pride, it punctures it, and you know you are no better than your neighbour.

But at the same time it gives you an identity that's rock solid, because it's not based on stuff that changes, like your hormones, or performance, or others' opinions, but on the God who never changes.

And so, if you're a Christian, what defines you is not your politics, or your ethnicity; it's not that you're single or married; it's not your sexual attractions or career success. It's that you're elect, chosen by God's grace.

But it would be easy to think like that and then withdraw from the world. To be the frozen chosen and retreat to the ghetto. So look what Peter says next: v1, 'To those who are elect exiles *of the Dispersion* in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.'

And the Dispersion was a term used for the Jewish people scattered throughout the gentile world. But Peter takes that and applies it to these Christians, Jews and Gentiles. That like a farmer takes a handful of seed and scatters it in the soil to reap a harvest, so God has chosen these men and women and scattered them in the world.

Chosen and scattered, not frozen and battered. Sown like seed in Pontus and Galatia, Cappadocia and Asia. Geneva and Morges and Lausanne. In the world, but radically different from the world. In the world to bear witness to the world.

So, when the world is hostile, or life is hard, remember you are elect and scattered like seed. You are chosen and planted where God wants you.

But Peter goes further, and in v2 he roots our identity in the Trinity.

Firstly, they are elect exiles, v2, 'according to the foreknowledge *of God the Father*.'

So, when you feel like you don't belong, Peter wants you to know, you're not lost. You're not like a piece of tumbleweed, blown by the winds of life. Instead, God knows you. So whatever anyone says to you, you're not on the wrong side of history, God's known you for all of history. And whether you're facing hardship or hostility, it hasn't crept up on God and caught him off guard. He foresaw it all.

But that God foreknew you means more than he just foresaw you. To be foreknown by God is to be fore-loved by God. It means that before you were even conceived, before your dad even looked at your mum, God the Father looked upon you and loved you with the same eternal love he has for God the Son and he set his faithful covenant love on you.

But, of course, the other kind of groups you could look to for an identity will also promise to love you, though they probably won't use those words. But look at the world and see how quickly they'll turn against you if you step out of line. They have to - their identity depends on it. But the Father's love for you is the exact opposite of that. Because he loved you before you were ever 'in line', before there was anything lovable about you. And to the day you die, and beyond, his love will pursue you.

So yes, you're an exile, and as a result life can be hard and you'll face opposition, but you are chosen and you are planted and you are loved.

But then, there's the Spirit. Elect exiles, v2, 'In the sanctification of the Spirit.' Now, we tend to think of sanctification as the lifelong process by which we become more holy. But Peter's got something else in mind. Because to be sanctified is to be set apart as holy. And when you become a Christian that's what the Holy Spirit does. He takes hold of your life and transfers you once and for all from the unholy, to the holy. From the domain of darkness to the kingdom of light.

So, Peter says, as you face opposition because you're a Christian, know you are chosen, know you are planted where God wants you; know you are foreknown and fore-loved by the Father and know you have been set apart as a member of God's people by the Spirit.

But, you could know all that and it still not radically change your life. That's not what Peter expects.

And a Purpose to Live For

You see, you are chosen and planted and foreknown by the Father and set apart by the Spirit for a reason. And that is, v2, 'for obedience to Jesus Christ.' To find your purpose in God the Son.

Now, we live in an incredibly secular age, and yet the growth in interest in things like mindfulness and spirituality tells you people are hungry for something beyond themselves. And Christianity offers you that, but not just to develop your spiritual side. But so you can obey the call of Christ in the good news of the gospel, and then live a lifetime of obedience to him.

But you might hear that and think, 'Obedience? That doesn't sound much like good news to me. I'm after freedom, not obedience.' Sure, but you're going to obey some master or other, just like you're going to carry one message or another. Later on, Peter will talk about 'obedience to the truth' (1:22). And just as in his day, you're bombarded by competing truth claims, all fighting for your allegiance. Claims as to how to be happy, whether or not a man can become a woman and vice versa, whether or not it matters what you believe, whether there's even a God to believe in.

So it's not like you can go through life like a human Switzerland, neutral and non-aligned. You're going to obey something, one so-called truth or another will have your allegience. One master or another will have your heart.

Why should it be Christ, especially when it might bring opposition your way?

Well, look at the last thing Peter says about them. They are chosen, planted, foreknown, set apart for obedience to Jesus, v2, 'and for sprinkling with his blood.'

And Peter's looking back to when the people of Israel were rescued from slavery in Egypt and had come to Mount Sinai. And after Moses read them God's law and how, as God's people, they were called to live differently from all the nations around them, the people responded by saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (Ex 24:7). Set apart for obedience. And then Moses took the blood of a sacrifice and sprinkled it over them, saying "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you." (Ex 24:8).

The problem is, they didn't obey, and in time they were no different from the nations around them. But what they couldn't do, what we could never do, Jesus has done. Because he's the one true Israelite, the only one who has perfectly obeyed God's law. And at the cross he paid the penalty for our failure to do it. And his blood became the blood of the new covenant that sprinkles, and cleanses and sets us apart as his people.

So God choosing you, and planting you, and loving you, and setting you apart as his, is not based on you living a good moral, obedient life. It's based on what Christ has done for you. And when you understand the measure of his love, that he would die for you when you were disobedient and no different from anyone else, you'll want to obey him, because you'll love him. And you'll want to stay faithful to him, and keep going.

And as you do, you'll experience the two things Peter closes his introduction with. Verse 2, 'May grace and peace be multiplied to you.'

In Peter's day, if you were writing a letter in Greek you'd begin it with *charein* - greetings. Peter changes that to *charis* - grace. And if you were a Jew, you'd greet your friends with *shalom*, the all-encompassing peace of God. And Peter combines that peace with the undeserved favour of God - grace - the two things we all need in bucket-loads, and says may these be multiplied to you. And in Christ they are. Because you're chosen, planted, loved, set apart, sprinkled and now have a purpose to live for: obedience to Jesus.