

The reading from 1 Peter was as follows:

<sup>13</sup> *Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.* <sup>14</sup> *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.* <sup>15</sup> *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;* <sup>16</sup> *for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*

Unusually for a talk at Valley Worship, I will start with a few thoughts about international relations and politics, after what has seemed a pretty earth-shaking last few weeks. For the whole of my life, the certainty and stability of the alliance between the US and Western Europe has been assumed. I would argue that this strong alliance had led to an unusually long period of peace and prosperity on a continent so often torn apart by war across history. Of course across the decades there have been tensions amongst members of this alliance, but there has been no real questioning of its core rationale.

Needless to say, recently these assumptions have been challenged and I'd suggest we've seen more and more pushing of established limits of human authority and power in the process.

I know from conversations with neighbours and friends that I am not alone in having found these developments profoundly worrying. Can I ask if you have more, or less, confidence about the future, after all that has unfolded in global politics lately? Are you happy to entrust our security to our current world leaders?

In these serious times, I have been pondering the extent to which the peace we all crave can be found in God, rather than through human alliances and institutions that are fraying at the seams. Can he be trusted with our lives? What is his plan to ensure our long-term security?

Let's have a look at this passage from 1 Peter and see if what it says leads us to any conclusions. Right at the heart of this passage, in verses 15 and 16, Peter says: *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*

Let's think about what holiness is and why and how God is holy.

The Hebrew word for 'holy' principally means 'set apart' or 'set apart for a purpose.' God is like no other being – he has no equal, he is incomparable and he is in a class all by himself. Indeed, he is defined only by himself – when he appeared to Moses at the burning bush, as described in Exodus Chapter 3, he introduced himself by saying 'I am who I am,' conveying that he is entirely self-sufficient and that his existence is not contingent upon any other being.

He – and he alone - is also the source of all life: he designed all things, created all things and sustains all things. Listen to Isaiah chapter 40, speaking of God - 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? ... Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?'

God is also unchanging in his nature and is absolutely pure -- with no hint of sin nor darkness in his character or actions. Because he also sees all people and all circumstances he is qualified to be the perfect judge. He sets the unvarying standard for ethical and moral purity against which all our behaviour and actions can be compared.

Maybe we can try to grasp the concept of God's holiness by thinking of our sun. It is unique, at least within our solar system, and through its light and warmth is the source of all life on this planet. But it is also blazing in its intensity – the temperature of its surface is 6,000 degrees Celsius, rising to an estimated 15 million at its core. So if we got anywhere near the sun, to put it bluntly we would be incinerated by its ferocious heat.

I mention this grim prospect as a reminder that in Old Testament times God's people were acutely aware of his holiness and of the terrible consequences of coming too close to him, given that they recognised they could never live up to his standards. The purity that God's intense presence demanded led to elaborate rituals of washing and cleansing before entering the temple, as an example. Isaiah reacted to seeing God, as recorded in Isaiah, Chapter 6, verse 5, by saying: 'Woe to me! I am ruined!'

So maybe it is time to pause to take hold of where we stand before this holy, set apart God and what in our actions and behaviours might offend him.

In verse 14, Peter speaks of 'evil desires' and a little later in this letter, at the start of Chapter 2, he names some, imploring his readers 'to rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind.' Even more starkly, at the beginning of Chapter 4, he adds to this list 'debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.'

I'd guess you wouldn't tick a lot of the boxes on this charge sheet, but -- being rigorously honest -- how often have we gossiped about someone behind their back? Wouldn't that qualify under 'slander of every kind'? Or are we hypocritical in how we express our views, saying one thing to one set of friends and the opposite to another, depending on what we think might play better with each audience? Or, when we think about how we use our time, have we effectively worshipped Instagram or another type of addictive social media, sometimes for hours on end? Have these taken a disproportionate place in our lives, to the point that they could be called an idol? Equally, have we allowed ourselves to be defined by our work, by where we live or by our share portfolios, which are also potentially idols too if they become too important to us?

In this spirit of rigorous honesty, if even 10 minutes of my private thoughts were to be transcribed and become publicly available, with all their self-centredness and judgementalism revealed alongside all the time I spend thinking about money matters, I'd think you'd be pretty taken aback and I'd be very embarrassed.

In truth we all have to admit that, were we to have some kind of spiritual MRI, sadly it would show areas of spiritual disease and potentially quite threatening tumour-like shadows in all of us. Indeed the Bible delivers just this kind of diagnosis in many

places. Romans 3:23, as an example, tells us ‘for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ Left to our own devices, we would all be judged and found wanting by a holy God.

But -- all hope is not lost. God has provided the means by which, despite all our failings and impurities, we can stand before a holy God, free of judgment by him and actually welcomed into his intense presence. Although he remains the almighty, totally pure God, remarkably we can now draw close to him and experience his compassion and forgiveness.

How is this even conceivably possible? How is this seemingly intractable paradox resolved?

The answer can be found in Romans 3:24, which says ‘and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.’

What do these terms ‘justified freely’ and ‘redemption’ mean? Simply stated, they mean that Jesus himself, through his self-sacrifice on the cross, has satisfied a holy God’s complete abhorrence of sin and the payment that his perfect justice requires to be made for that sin. After living a life entirely without sin himself, Jesus took all the weight of humanity’s sin onto himself and paid its crushing penalty through his own death. He has literally taken our place. Remarkably, when God looks at those who have put their faith in Jesus, instead of our sinfulness he sees only Jesus’ perfect obedience and purity.

The apostle Paul concisely described this incredible exchange in 1 Corinthians 5:21: ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’

To continue the medical analogy, it is as if our spiritual MRIs – instead of showing disease and tumours – were completely clean. Just imagine if you walked into a consultant appointment thinking you were about to hear confirmation that cancer had spread in your body -- and instead left having been told that none could be found, that it was all gone. How much relief and joy would that news bring?

By his spirit Jesus is here today with us. He is freely offering to give each of us an all clear spiritual MRI result. There are no waiting lists for this kind of treatment and Jesus’ supply of saving grace is never constrained by a fixed budget that might run out.

Let’s think a bit more about the nature of Jesus, keeping in mind – in a hard-to-explain divine mystery – that Jesus, as a member of the trinity, was and is the very same holy God I’ve been talking about. Yet he chose voluntarily to enter our fallen world of muck and mess. And how did he react to all the impurities here? Did he maintain his separateness, recoiling in horror from our sin, shame, disease and brokenness?

No -- he did the opposite. He didn’t insist on any purification rituals before anyone came into contact with him, instead he freely moved amongst lepers, outcasts, criminals, rejects, the lame and the blind, bringing forgiveness and healing to them. And ultimately, he literally gave himself up for the lost on the cross, subjecting himself to the most gruesome of punishments for sins he himself had not committed.

At the start of this talk I asked whether we can trust God with our long-term security or whether our confidence is better placed in human alliances and institutions. I believe God alone offers us long-term, indeed eternal, peace and security in a way that no political leader ever could.

Does he ask anything of us in response to his self-sacrificing love? Yes -- turning back to verse 16 we are given a simple command to guide our lives: *"Be holy, because I am holy."*

We know we can never meet his perfect standards, but we also know he created us to live lives free of malice, deceit and and slander, not to mention debauchery, lust and idolatry, and to live holy ones instead. How can we do so, recognising the limits of our own strength as well as all the temptations we face?

I'd suggest these are the steps involved:

- First, we can receive the holiness and freedom from judgment for our sin that Jesus won on the cross, by putting our faith in what he has done, rather than our own works;
- Second, we can take on board the astonishing truth that when we do this, God actually sees us as holy too; and
- Third, we can start to reflect this truth in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There's a theological term for this third step – sanctification – which refers to the continual process by which God helps a person to reflect his holy character more and more.

If we have received both forgiveness and this new holy status from God, then it should encourage us as we make choices each day as to how we will live, whether to live as God leads and teaches or whether to set our own course. We can invite the Holy Spirit to fill us anew each day and to help us to be transformed from the inside out. We need to live up to who we already are – not trying to earn our salvation all over again, but living each day as those who have been forgiven and forgiving those who sin against us.

God is speaking words of affirmation and encouragement all the time if we listen to him – I hope this morning all of you now hear him saying 'I see you as holy, so be holy!'

There is such power in the words spoken over us – power to destroy or to build up.

I'd like to close with brief testimony about the impact of encouraging words, of being told that you can do something you thought you couldn't, or are seen in a way that you thought you weren't. When I was 8 or so, I sang in our church's children's choir and, after the service one morning, an elderly lady came up to the choir as we were milling about waiting for our parents. To one person she said, 'You sang so well this morning,' to another she said 'You sang with such gusto today,' or words to that effect, and when she came to me she said, 'Oh, I heard you...you really can't sing...you should leave the choir,' which I soon did. For the intervening 57 years until last April, I thought I couldn't sing and so should suppress my voice when singing in public places. It was only on joining our local Gospel choir and being told by its very talented leader Tim that, actually, I can sing that this mindset changed – and already I have experienced so much fun and joy in singing since then.

So, if that is the impact of one person's affirming words, how much more can those of a holy God have on you, if you accept his invitation to believe in him and his encouragement to 'Be holy, as I am holy'?

Amen.