

**'All the difference in the world' (Week 1 Frontline Sundays) St Nicolas 10.00am
Sunday 20 October 2019 1 Peter 1:1-2 and Matthew 5:13-16**

Wouldn't it be great if we each were making all the difference in the world in those places where we spend the majority of the week; in those places where we are when we are not in church?

This morning, as you may know, is the first of five what we are calling our 'Frontline Sundays'. The title comes from material provided by the *London Institute of Contemporary Christianity* which we shall be using as the overarching framework for our Sundays.

Now let me say straightaway, I recognise that not everyone is overly comfortable with this word 'frontline'. Well fair enough. However, perhaps I might say that if that's you, please don't be put off, but rather try and look beyond the word itself and see instead the meaning this word is intended to convey, namely the place or places where we spend the majority of our week, the hours when we are not in church. For some that might be the workplace. But for others, it might be amongst our families, with our friends, at clubs or societies, with our neighbours, the places where we do voluntary work. That is really what is meant by 'frontline' in this context.

So for the next five weeks, although we will be hopping over Remembrance Sunday because we'll need to do that Sunday a little bit differently, we'll be thinking about how we can all be effective as Christian disciples in the places where we spend the majority of our week, Monday to Saturday.

To get us into our theme this morning, I'd like to turn again to our first reading this morning, 1 Peter 1:1-2. It's on page 1217 of our church Bibles for those of you who would find it helpful to have it open in front of them.

I am very grateful for the thank you cards I have received over the years following the taking of, for example, a wedding or a funeral. I keep them in a drawer, and anytime I need a little encouragement I get these cards out and read them both again!

No, I am only joking. People have been very kind and, over the years, I have received many cards. I am so grateful for them because they have been a real encouragement.

Peter's first letter is written in maybe the early AD 60s to encourage ... principally to encourage the scattered churches in Asia Minor - modern day Turkey - who were experiencing suffering and trials, suffering and trials which were set only to get worse. Here are two things which Peter says about those to whom he writes.

First, he describes them as God's *elect*.

There it is, right at the beginning of his epistle. "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect..."

As you know, from the time of Abraham onwards, Israel was God's elect, God's chosen people, blessed and intended to be a blessing to the world around them! But shockingly, at least for those who were still getting used to how much things had changed in the light of Jesus, all Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, had now become the company of God's elect.

Now it may just be that as we meet here this morning, we don't think of ourselves as God's elect. "No, no," we maybe say to ourselves, "I couldn't possibly be!" But let me tell you that if you are a Christian, you are one of God's elect.

That, I hope you might agree, is fantastic news.

In the visual on the screen, we Christians are the red dots. The reason there are six red dots is because in the UK around 6% of people worship in a Christian church once a month or more.

Now it's important that all of us who are Christians understand and appreciate that we are included in that great company which is God's elect. And because of this, we are therefore also equally included in God's mission to the world.

It is unfortunate, isn't it, that in the past the church has sometimes overemphasised the distinction between clergy and the laity, with the result that many of the laity have often seen themselves as having a far less significant part to play in God's mission than the clergy.

But this is so wrong. All Christians, whether clergy or laity, are Gods' elect, and as such all have an equally significant part to play.

Here's another statistic for you! Lay people attending Church of England churches number around one million regular attenders and make up 98 percent of the Church of England. 98 percent!

Well on that basis alone, you can see there are exceedingly good pragmatic reasons for suggesting the laity should be involved in the mission of God. But what I am saying to you this morning is more than just pragmatism – it's about theology; it's about every Christian fulfilling their calling as the elect people of God.

So first, Peter describes those to whom he writes as God's elect. And then...

Second, he describes them as *exiles*

This follows on immediately from where he describes them as God's select. "To God's select, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia..."

What does it mean to be an exile? Put simply, it means to be somewhere unfamiliar and alien, and away from the familiar landmarks of home.

Two tourists are driving through Wales. At Llanfairpwllgwyngllgogerychwryndrobwlllyantsllyogogoch they stop for lunch. But they get into a bit of an argument about how to pronounce properly the name of the place they are in. And so one tourist asks the waitress, “Before we order, could you please settle an argument for us? Would you please pronounce the name of the place where we are... very slowly?”

“Sure,” says the waitress. And so she leans over and says ever so slowly, “Burr-gurrr-Kinngg...”

Well we’ve all been there, haven’t we? Not Burger King, I mean, but to places where we’re very conscious, ‘This most definitely is not home’. Places where everything – the language, the customs, the food, the currency and so on – are so very different from what we’re used to.

For the Christians who had been scattered far and wide, they were very conscious that they were now living in places which were not their home. They were exiles living in a foreign land. And so Peter writes this “travellers’ guide for Christian pilgrims,” to quote commentator Edmund Clowney.

But it was not simply those to whom Peter wrote who were exiles; we, too, if we are one of God’s elect, are exiles.

“What do you mean?” I can hear you remonstrating, “I am not an exile, I’ve lived in Bookham, or at the very least Surrey, all my life!”

But that’s not what I mean. We are exiles in the sense that if we are a Christian, then there will at times be ways in which we do not entirely fit this world; ways in which we will feel like strangers, even if the people around us still look pretty familiar.

Let me give you an example of what I mean here.

When I had a proper job, that is, before I was ordained and worked in an office, as a Christian I believed it was important to work hard ... to render unto Caesar that which was Caesar’s, to borrow a phrase from Jesus. So I was a hard-working and committed employee.

But I also believed that, at the end of the day, enough was enough and it was sometimes important to prioritise other things, not least my commitment to my church. To render unto God that which was God’s, again to borrow from Jesus. And yet that was sometimes difficult where the culture was work, work, work, and anyone who didn’t appear to give every last drop of blood to the corporate enterprise was deemed uncommitted.

Here’s another example of what I mean, although this time not from the world of my work but world of Dr David Mackereth, a Christian doctor who was forced out of his job working for the Department for Work and Pensions after refusing to identify clients by their chosen gender instead of their biological sex.

At an employment tribunal in July, giving evidence, Dr Mackereth had said that he was asked in a conversation with his line manager: “If you have a man six foot tall with a beard who says he wants to be addressed as ‘she’ and ‘Mrs’, would you do that?”

Dr Mackereth said that in good conscience he could not do that.

The tribunal, however, did not side with Dr Mackereth, ruling that his Biblical view was “incompatible with human dignity”.

What is true of work, can of course be true of many other contexts as well. Whether it’s in our approach to money or time or relationships or the environment or a whole host of other things, our Christian beliefs about such things can sometimes lead us to feel as if we are out of step with the world around us ... that we don’t fully belong ... that we are exiles.

What, then, is the answer? To huddle together in church trying to keep the alien world around us at bay?

Not at all! Rather, to each seek to make all the difference in the world on our frontlines, wherever those might be. To be – to use the words of our Gospel reading – salt and light.

Here again are the red dots I showed you earlier. However, rather than huddled altogether in a corner, they are instead spread out amongst the 94 grey dots surrounding them. And as a result, one can begin to expect them to bring change to the world around them.

Here’s a short film...

Film

To sum up what I’ve been trying to say this morning, here’s a quotation from a Church of England report which came out a couple or so year’s ago. Called ‘Setting God’s People Free’ the whole point of the report was to say that if we, as the church, are going make any real impact on the world, then that is going to have to be because all of us, clergy and laity alike, are fulfilling our vocation as the elect people of God.

“A great opportunity lies before us. It is the same opportunity that has presented itself to the Church in every decade for the last 100 years. It is an opportunity that arguably has not been fully grasped since the days of Wesley.

Will we determine to empower, liberate and disciple the 98% of the Church of England who are not ordained and therefore set them free for fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence, leadership and, most importantly, vibrant relationship with Jesus in all of life? And will we do so not only in church-based ministry on a Sunday but in work and school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday?”

Prayer

*Our Father in heaven,
May your name indeed be hallowed.*

*May your kingdom come, your will be done,
As in heaven so in our nation,
As in heaven so in our fields and cities, our homes and streets,
Our schools and offices, our factories and clubs, our hospitals and hospices,
As in heaven so in our church,
As in heaven so in our hearts and minds and spirit.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*