

## Remembrance Sunday 10am

(1 Peter 1:3-6 p1217; Luke 20:27-38 p1055)

Father God, may my words and our thoughts be guided by your Holy Spirit, and transform our lives to the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Welcome to St Nicolas, welcome especially if you are here particularly because it is Remembrance Sunday. Welcome also to our uniformed organisations, for helping make this a very special service.

The men and women we have come here to remember lived and died in hope. Hope of a better world, a better future for their children and grandchildren – for you and me. Today we remember their suffering and sacrifice. We remember that “for our tomorrows, they gave their todays.” And we are thankful.

Their hope for our future gave them the courage and fortitude to live through the most horrendous times. Sadly, many people in the world today still live through horrendous times. We are frequently faced with news of ethnic cleansing, knife crime, or cyber-bullying. We see our MPs resigning, and demand for children’s mental health services increasing year on year because of cyber-bullying. It seems that we live in a new age of persecution. What hope can we give to these victims, to strengthen their courage and give them fortitude in their suffering?

Peter’s letter, some of which we just read, was written to a group of Christians who were suffering persecution. He

wrote to give them hope in their suffering. In fact today marks the end of a week of prayer for the persecuted church. You might be surprised to know that around the world Christians are probably the most widely persecuted people. And yet, despite their persecution, they hold on to their faith. They do so because of the hope that Peter describes in this letter. So what does Peter say – and who was he anyway?

Peter was directly appointed by Jesus himself to lead his church. Jesus said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” (The word for Peter and rock are the same word). Peter was one of Jesus inner circle along with James and John, so he knew Jesus really well.

Peter was there when Jesus was arrested, saw him at his trial, knew him to be crucified dead and buried, saw the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes. After Jesus rose from the dead, Peter met him in the upper room, talking with the disciples, eating fish. He saw him on the beach barbequing fish, when Jesus took Peter himself aside for a deeply personal one-to-one conversation. Peter heard Jesus final commission; and witnessed his ascension into heaven.

Peter was an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and was filled with the knowledge of the reality of life beyond death. Now he wanted to share that knowledge, that hope, that certainty with these suffering Christians. He wanted to tell them of the hope they can hold on to even through their sufferings. He wanted to assure them that this hope cannot be taken from them. Unlike merely human hope in a better future, this hope is, to quote Peter “an inheritance

that can never perish, spoil or fade.” Why? Because “it is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power.”

Peter lifts his hearers focus away from their suffering and persecution, to help them see the bigger picture. He begins with praise: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

For Peter, and for all Christian believers, Jesus resurrection makes all the difference, not just in the world, but beyond the world; not just for this life but beyond this life too.

*This reminds me of a teenager I used to work with. She had a number of problems, including severe anorexia, and was unable to complete her degree. Despite all this, she remained positive, hopeful. I shall never forget the day she came in to work and said “The good thing about hitting rock bottom, is you discover the Rock.” By ‘the Rock’ she meant Jesus. She was a Christian who believed in her heart, but it was through her suffering that she came to know Jesus in her life. For her, the Rock was the foundation upon which she could rebuild her life. In Jesus she had found real hope, and it changed her life.*

Peter urges us to embrace this new life, this living hope, promised to us through Jesus. Because Jesus rose from the dead – and Peter had witnessed that personally – we too can have hope in life beyond death.

That's a staggering claim, even though Jesus Resurrection is one of the best attested facts of ancient history. What assurance do we have that we too can experience resurrection to a new life? Jesus is after all unique, he is the Son of God; he has life in himself, he is its author and sustainer, of course he could rise from the dead! But we're not!

In Jesus time, people were split over whether or not there can be life after death – much as they are split today over the same question. There were factions in Judaism around this very point. And so in our gospel we find Jesus challenged with a trick question. It was a question designed to highlight the absurdity of resurrection. Resurrection would make a nonsense of the Jewish obligation of a man to marry his brother's widow. "Whose wife would she be in the resurrection?" They taunted.

As we read the gospels, we usually find Jesus responding to such challenges with a question. 'Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?' they asked. 'Whose image and likeness is on the coin?' he responded. 'Caesar's' they replied. 'Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' Jesus didn't teach them that they themselves were made in God's image, that all they are should be given to God. No, he let them work that out for themselves. He rarely gave direct answers to direct questions.

But this question was different. This time Jesus took sides. This time he left his hearers in no doubt of God's truth.

The truth of the resurrection life was and still is fundamentally important. Jesus answer began with a personal challenge – are you on God’s side or not? He spoke of ‘Those who are worthy of taking part in the age to come, and in the resurrection from the dead...’. Who are the worthy? Am I worthy? This is a question, quite literally, of life and death. The answer Jesus and the apostles have given is this: Those who are worthy are simply those who have faith in Jesus power and willingness to deliver on his promise of forgiveness, of new birth and of resurrection. All we have to do is trust our lives to the one who gave his life up for us.

When we place our faith and hope in Jesus we gain new birth, new life, a new identity. In Jesus own words ‘These are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.’ Jesus offer of new life is open to all who choose to follow him, not as simply a great teacher, but as the life-giving saviour – the very Son of God himself.

Jesus goes on to talk of God, of the name God gave himself. Jesus doesn’t here mention God’s name of self-existence – the great I AM. At the burning bush, God disclosed this name to Moses when he declared “I AM who I AM”; “tell the Israelites ‘I AM has sent me to you’”. Rather Jesus recalls God’s relational name given to Moses on the same occasion “I AM the God of your fathers; the God of Abraham; the God of Isaac; and the God of Jacob.” These were real people, ancestors of Moses own people, who walked the earth generations before.

Then Jesus utterly stunned his questioners with one of the most profound and obvious truths; but one that they had not woken up to before. Jesus declared “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

Our hope in the resurrection is based not just in Peter’s historical witness, but also in Jesus own teaching, and in the very nature of who God is. It is God himself, through Jesus who encourages us into relationship, to call him Daddy, Abba, Father. To come to him as a loving father. To bring to him our struggles, our suffering our distress. To receive from him healing, forgiveness and new life.

You might say, that’s a nice bit of theology, but does it make any practical difference to us today?

*Let me tell you about a brother and two sisters who suffered as a result of the first world war. Harry was my grand-dad, while Alice and Nellie were my great aunts. Harry was gassed at Ypres and came home with shell-shock or PTSD as we would call it now. He was never able to look after himself properly. He lived without hope, and after his wife Lilly died, he spent seven years in a care home and died without hope in a self-absorbed pitiful misery.*

*By contrast, his sisters, my great aunts were war spinsters. After the war there were not enough men to go around, so they never married. But they lived together joyfully for the rest of their lives. As a little boy I always enjoyed visiting them. My last memory, then as a grown up, was of Nellie when she took me aside at Alice’s funeral, and said “Chrisoffer, I want you to know that Alice and I prayed for*

*you every day of your life!” Wow. That was a mind-blowing moment that has stayed with me ever since. They knew the joy of a hope greater than their circumstances, a hope that transcended their disappointment.*

Our hope is based not only on the words of Jesus and the witness of Peter. We can also see the difference that Christian hope has made in the lives of others too. We can see the effects of hopeless self-absorption on the lives of those who like my grandfather, are unable to find release from their suffering. We can see the effects of Christian hope and purpose in the lives of those, who like my great aunts, look beyond their own circumstances, and discover life transformed.

Christian hope is born of faith in Jesus; his resurrection, and his promise of new life for each one of us. We too can experience the same hope in our own lives. We too, like Peter, and my great aunts Alice and Nellie can be witnesses of that hope to others.

Like the brave men and women who for our tomorrows gave their todays; we too can look beyond ourselves. We too can sacrifice something of our todays by reaching out even to those who cause us suffering, by offering them God’s love, God’s blessing, God’s hope for their tomorrows. In such self-giving, we honour those who gave up so much for us; and we honour Jesus through whose own sacrifice we have received the hope of new life.

Amen.