We began our studies last week by thinking about the first 12 verses of this short letter: a letter written probably by the apostle Peter, probably in Rome, probably about AD 60ish, to a group of churches covering a vast geographical area in the north of Asia Minor, which is now Turkey. And Peter didn’t know these Christians. He had never visited the churches, and neither had Paul, and we don’t know a huge amount about them, except the fact that they were predominantly Gentiles.

And these churches were struggling to stay firm in the faith under the rule of Emperor Nero, who was not afraid to persecute Christians. And so this was a tough time for the recipients of Peter’s letter.

And Peter began his writing to them by reminding them that they were chosen by God, set apart for him, through the blood of Jesus Christ - and that their identity was to be found in their calling, even though the practical result of that is that they were living as strangers in the world. And this is a truth for us today; that we are in the world but not of it and so we must do our best to work out what it means to live as Christians in the light of the tensions this raises for us.

And the rest of Peter’s letter is intensely pragmatic as he helps us to work out what the principles are by which we are to live out our faith. If you want to follow today’s passage with me, you’ll find it on page 249 in the New Testament, the second half, of the pew Bibles.

And the practical nature of Peter’s teaching starts straight away in verse 13: “Therefore prepare your minds for action.”

There is a real sense of urgency in the way that Peter phrases this. It’s not that we must be prepared in case we are called upon to act as Christians some time in the future - but that we must be prepared so that we can act straight away.

And how are we to prepare? Peter says, ‘Prepare your minds…’

Is he saying that we should learn more and develop more intelligence and knowledge with regard to Christian beliefs? I don’t think that is what he means because the next part of this phrase says, “…discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.” So in verse 13, it seems to me that what Peter is saying is that in the light of our identity in God and the life to which we are called, we must be absolutely wholehearted and actively engaged in the lifestyle of concentrated prayer. Our mind, our understanding is not primarily to be geared towards the acquisition of knowledge – even though that is important – so much as the experience of God through prayer. The development of a concentrated prayer life is a preparation, if you like, for the hope we have for the future: the hope that will be revealed to us at the Second Coming.

As Christians we are called to pray and to meditate on the hope we have, which is the revealing of Jesus Christ at the end times. And as we meditate on that hope and allow it to fill our very beings, so we will be able to get perspective on our present experience and be able to interpret the sufferings and trials of our present life in the appropriate context of the hope that is to come.

Peter is saying that we can only cope with and survive our earthly trials if we spend time meditating on the future hope that is to be revealed.

So we are waiting for that day…And what hallmarks our waiting? How do we wait for Christ to return?

As Peter says in verse 14: “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.” Now, this is a fascinating verse, with a few things to be said about it…

First, here is the clearest evidence so far that Peter is writing to Gentiles, not Jews. Do you remember last week, I said that this is a letter to Gentile Christians, even though it is written in a very Jewish style? Well, here is a good piece of evidence for that, because Peter talks about “the desires that you formerly had in ignorance”. Now, whatever other phrase Peter may have used about the Jews, he would not have said that they were driven by ignorance…The Greek word he uses here is not about intellectual deficiency – a charge that he and Paul may have brought to the Jews – but that is not really the meaning of the word he uses here. Instead, the word has the meaning of moral and religious defect; the idea of paganism, which is far more suited to past Gentile living.

Second, the word that he uses for ‘desires’ is a neutral word, which tells us that desires are not necessarily bad. This is important because the church seems to have implicitly taught for centuries that passions are, by nature, bad, and that we need to get our passions under control. But Peter doesn’t say that. Peter tells us that passions are neutral. The issue is, ‘What are we passionate about’?

Third, Peter calls us ‘obedient’ - and this word doesn’t have to do with our moral or ethical behaviour so much as the idea that obedience is about us accepting the Gospel and believing in Jesus: that is our spiritual obedience…

Fourth, Peter calls us ‘children’, which indicates the spiritual privilege we have of calling God our Father. That is a privilege we must not take for granted: it is such a privilege to be able to call the Creator of the Universe, Father; it is the pinnacle of the Christian faith…

So, there’s a lot of good theology in this verse that even on its own, we could spend a whole sermon exploring…But we need to move on…

Verse 15: “Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct…” The first thing to say here is that Peter does not say, “Become holy” but “be holy”…The truth is that you and I are already holy. Theologically speaking, it is not something that we become: we are holy already, so “Be holy…”

That being the case, what does holiness mean in this context? Clearly, it is not a definition of our behaviour because otherwise, we would be able to ‘become holy’ by behaving better. No, holiness is our status, not a description of how we behave and so we are to be holy like the Holy One, like God. So what does that mean?

Well, in the Scriptures, the description of the holiness of God is directly linked to the idea that he is set apart, he is different. And so Peter is saying that we must be set apart from the world in the same way that God is set apart from the world. Now, of course, that will work itself out in our patterns of behaviour - but the way we behave does not define whether we are holy or not. And that is such an important difference, because if we think that our holiness is defined by our behaviour, we will always feel guilty when our behaviour does not live up to our profession of faith. But the truth is, when we fail morally or ethically, we are still holy because that’s who we are, already, in God…

And so Peter goes on in verse 17 to say: “If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.” There are two comments here about the nature of God: what God is in himself and in relation to the whole world, and who he is in relation to us as believers. In relation to us, and the world in general, he is the Judge who is to come on the last day. In relation to us as individuals, he is our Father and we have the privilege of calling him Father. And so, as Christians, we are to hold these two ideas in constant tension: the intimacy of knowing God as Father but also the awesome reality that the Almighty God will also be our Judge.

And so we are encouraged to have reverent fear of God. Too often, we know Christians who seem to be too cosy with God; who speak of God as if were their best mate, to be treated in too informal a manner, too offhand a manner. On the other hand, we know Christians who are too frightened of God; who can’t relate to him as Father but only as a stern, disciplinarian Judge. We are to walk the middle path between the two ideas: to relate to God as both Father and Judge; a middle path that is far from easy…

And in verse 18, we get the second hint that this letter is written to Gentiles, not Jews, because Peter mentions “the futile ways inherited from your ancestors”. And again, this is not a comment that could be made about the Jews, is it? And we are reminded that it is by the precious blood of Christ that we are saved. In the context of this letter, the blood of Jesus is precious primarily to God, over and above precious to us because he is honoured and loved by God. Jesus, who is honoured and loved by God – and destined by God for a specific purpose: in verse 20, Peter says that Christ “was destined before the foundation of the world”: destined for a particular role, a particular work, which was the salvation of the world.

And, in verse 20, Peter tells us that he “was revealed at the end of the ages” - an idea that the world has been divided up into certain epochs or eras and the final era has been hallmarked by the first coming of Christ and will continue until his second coming.

And in verse 21, we have yet another proof that this letter is written to Gentiles, not Jews: “Through him, you have come to trust in God”. The Jewish race trusted in God already although, as Paul told us in his letter to the Romans, they still needed to recognise Jesus as their Messiah. But the Gentiles had no such heritage – and neither did we: it is through Jesus Christ that we have become believers in God and as Peter goes on to say in verse 21, it is through his death and resurrection and ascension to glory that our faith has become real, as Peter says: “So that your faith and hope are set on God”.

That is where we stand with God. And so Peter moves us on in verse 22: “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.”

Again, like with the idea of holiness, Peter is not saying that we must purify our souls: he is saying that we have already been purified by the blood of Christ; it is not dependent on our behaviour but on our faith. And since we have already been purified, that must now work itself out in one primary action: love.

Peter calls us to a life of love; a life of deep and unremitting love. That is a tough call – it is more than just tolerance of each other, tolerance of difference: it is absolute acceptance of each other, warts and all, over and over and over again…

And it is interesting that Peter links purification of our souls with unremitting love: the basic Christian truth is simply this: we have been chosen by God so that we can love others. That is the purpose of your life and mine: to love others…it is that for which we have been purified…

Now, of course, that kind of love doesn’t happen overnight; we need to work at it and Peter really hints strongly at that in verse 23: “You have been born anew, not of perishable but imperishable seed”. Now this is a highly nuanced verse, but so, so important because Peter doesn’t use the usual Greek word for ‘seed’ here. The usual Greek word is ‘sperma’, which generally refers to the seed itself as in Jesus’ parable of the sower who sowed seeds. But here, Peter uses the word ‘spora’, which has a greater emphasis on the idea of the growing process of the seed. So we have been purified, we have been born anew, from the planting of imperishable seed - a seed that is continually growing within us so that we can increasingly grow in unremitting love for one another…

Isn’t that a beautiful image? It absolutely describes the growth of Christian fellowship in one, concise, incredible metaphor. We are to grow in unremitting love, one for another, as time goes by: that is what the church is all about. And that growth comes as we seep ourselves in the Scriptures and the instructions of God and this is the last thing I want to say about this passage today:

In verse 23, Peter says that the seed is planted “through the living and enduring word of God”. And in verse 25, Peter cites the passage from Isaiah that says: “the word of the Lord endures for ever”. Now, there are two different words for ‘word’ used here. Verse 23: “through the living and enduring word of God”, the word used is ‘logos’, which refers to the word of God in its entirety; the whole package of the Bible, if you like. In verse 25: ”the word of the Lord endures for ever”, the word is ‘rhema’, which refers to the individual sayings of God; individual words that he speaks to us.

So let’s be sure what Peter is saying here: the seed of God grows within us as we reflect on the whole of Scripture. But what endures forever is the fact that God will continuously speak to us and lead us and that is consolidated for us in the truth of the last verse: “That word was the good news that was announced to you”.

The whole content of the Gospel is a call to love: modelled to us in Christ Jesus, taught to us by Christ Jesus, inspired within us through the Spirit of Christ.

So this is a quite amazing passage; full of so much grace and so much challenge - and there is a deep simplicity to it: we are called to a life of love, unremitting love, for one another - and it is something we are to grow into as the weeks and months and years go by.

How do we grow in love for one another as a church? By beginning to seep ourselves in the Bible, the word of God to us, and by allowing God to speak to us through his Word. The more we study the Bible together, the deeper we get into it together, the more we will embrace God’s call on our lives and the more we will learn to love one another.

So let’s begin to commit ourselves to that: to studying God’s Word together and allowing that to shape who we are as a Church. And, as a result, we will become more loving and increasingly, a family which others want to belong to…