**1 Peter 5:1-14**

**Church: A Community of Love and Support**

Today, we come to the closing part of Peter’s letter. It has been an intensely pragmatic letter, written to Christians who were struggling to endure and persevere in the faith in the northern part of Asia Minor, in what is now modern Turkey.

And Peter has covered a lot of ground, giving teaching on how Christians should relate to one another, how they should relate to those in political authority, and how they need to stand firm in the face of trial and suffering knowing that the sufferings they face at the current time, no matter how bad the verbal abuse is incomparable to the glory that awaits them.

And, of course, there are some deep principles for us to take from this letter about how to conduct ourselves as a Christian community internally as well as in relation to the wider, unbelieving world and how we are to imitate Christ and follow in his footsteps as we patiently endure misunderstanding for the faith.

And now, at the end of this letter, Peter gives some closing instructions on how we are to relate to each other – and build relationships – as a Christian community.

What is the church? It is surely more than a building, more than an ancient heritage site. St. Andrew’s – as a church – is a community of love, where we walk together, and support one another, and love one another, constantly urging one another on in our discipleship of Jesus Christ.

And if we are to develop as a community of love, then we each have a responsibility to make that happen by supporting the leadership of the church and by encouraging one another as we walk with God in our lives.

Peter gives some instruction on how to fulfil both of those things in this passage. And if you want to follow it with me, you’ll find it on page 252 in the second half of the pew Bible, the New Testament.

**Firstly, then, supporting those in leadership…**

Peter begins by addressing the elders of the churches, the leaders of the congregations. So, in our own context, we are talking about me, about Olive, about the Church Wardens and the PCC. And he begins in verses 1 and 2 by introducing his theme: “I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly.”

This is such a lovely instruction for Peter to give because it draws our minds back to the commissioning he himself had received from the risen Christ on the seashore when Jesus said, ‘Tend my lambs…feed my sheep…’ Here is Peter, of whom so much had been asked by Christ, now passing the mantle on to his fellow-elders. It is a deeply intimate moment of the sharing of ministry.

And, of course, this is an enormous responsibility for any church leader to carry and they need our prayers – I need your prayers! The flock of God has been given into the care of the ministers, the Wardens, the PCC - and that is no small responsibility to carry. And it can only be done out of the right motivation and that is what Peter focuses on here.

Firstly, leaders are to lead not under compulsion but willingly. I can tell you first hand that it is easy to lose the joy of ministry when times are tough. Sometimes in leadership, when we face battles at every turn, when there is misunderstanding and hostility and criticism, it is very easy for the fire of passion to burn low or to go out altogether. We all know Christian leaders, I’m sure, who have got burned out in ministry and just carry on day by day, going through the motions because they have to do it; it is their job to.

But Peter wants leaders to lead willingly, not out of compulsion so there is a double responsibility here. Leaders have a responsibility to nurture their own private spirituality so that they are able to stay passionate and energetic for God in difficult times. But those of us who follow leaders have a responsibility to make life as easy as we possibly can for them, to pray for them and to be as helpful as possible, so that the rigours of the ministry do not overwhelm them.

But there is a slightly more sinister aspect to what Peter says here, because he also warns that leaders should not lead “for sordid gain but eagerly”. It appears that there were some leaders who were only in it for the money, for the perks of office. That is an inappropriate motivation for Christian leadership. Instead, leaders should lead with enthusiasm; ready and willing…

And then, in verse 3, he says, “Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock”. And of course, that means developing an example of humility, through which leaders are not to exercise power for themselves or for their own ends but as a matter of pure servanthood. And as the elders lead by example, so the congregation will take that model upon themselves and be more dedicated to servanthood too.

So firstly, the leaders here at St. Andrew’s carry a real weight of responsibility. All of us in leadership need to nurture our own spiritual lives and we are reliant on everyone to remember us regularly in prayer

**Secondly, Peter moves on to consider the spiritual lives of all those who sit under the leadership of the leaders**

Verse 5: “You who are younger must accept the authority of the elders”. Peter is not really contrasting older and younger members of the congregation here, in terms of age so much as the elders in authority and those who are younger, perhaps in the faith. And he is saying that all of us, regardless of position, regardless of age, regardless of spiritual maturity, must be hallmarked by the spiritual grace of humility as he goes on to say: “And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility…”

And Peter goes on to assure us that the eternal reward of living this life of humility together is everlasting glory, in verse 6: “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time”. We are reminded, of course, of Jesus’ words in Luke 14:11: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”. When Christ is revealed on the Last Day, we too shall be lifted up.

And because that is our hope for the future, Peter is able to go on to say in verse 7: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you”. Again, we are drawn back to a saying of Jesus, this time from Matthew 6:25, where we are assured of God’s care for us: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink…Look at the birds of the air…are you not more valuable than they?” God’s care for us is immense and we can be absolutely confident that he hears us and will never let us down in our time of need.

But if only life were that simple, that tranquil, that serene: it is not. Because we need to reckon with the enemy in our midst, whom Peter reminds us of in verse 8: “Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”

In this verse, Peter speaks of the opposition that Christians will face; that we face as a church as personified in one, single opponent: the devil. This isn’t the time to go into who the devil actually is - but clearly Peter understands there to be a universal conflict going on between the devil and the people of God and the whole world is the battle arena.

Christians are to have only one response to this devil, verse 9: “Resist him, steadfast in your faith…”

Because Peter is writing here about the community of faith, he is saying that we need to support one another, encourage one another, and develop a deep sense of solidarity as we learn to resist the Devil and pursue God as a church here at St. Andrew’s.

And then finally, to complete this letter, Peter brings us back to the one spiritual principle that has underpinned his whole letter; that we are to love one another, verse 14: “Greet one another with a kiss of love”. Therein lies the simplicity of the Gospel; the kiss of love extended through the fellowship of the church.

Surprise, surprise: it all comes back to love!

What is St. Andrew’s all about? Love, love, love…

And if we live in love with one another, Peter’s final words to us will surely come true: “Peace to all of you who are in Christ”

And so we reach the end of this brief letter that has been intensely pragmatic and very down to earth. Through it all, we have been assured of God’s constant love and care for us during times of trouble. We have been assured that, no matter what we are facing at the moment, we have waiting for us an unfading crown of glory and an eternity in the presence of God.

We are, I hope, more convinced than ever, that we need to live in love, peace and humility with one another and in so doing, in all things, we will be following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, who is both our example and our Saviour.

Amen.