

Sermon 16th August 2009 (2nd Peter 1v1-4) “Amazing theology”

We’ve just finished 4 weeks on Ruth, and what a story it was: famine, death, poverty, providence, sex, love, marriage and babies! It had it all – and it was thrilling. The Bible really can be awesome.

Well, now, I’m going to spend 5 weeks or so looking at 2nd Peter, and, my theme is going to be ... theology.

On Friday, we stayed the night in Fife, in Leuchars to be precise.

On Saturday morning, I said to the girls, there’s this early medieval church, I really want to see.

They’ve got a sad daddy who’s fascinated by mid-twelfth century ecclesiastical architecture.

Anyone else got that passion?

Well, as you can imagine, Rebecca responded by that universal children’s catchphrase that’s applicable to any situation short of Disneyland... “*booooooring*”.

Now, I suspect (I could be wrong), but I suspect that when a minister says:

“let’s do theology” to a congregation these days
the reaction tends to be “boring”
or maybe “do we have to, daddy?”

If I’m enthusiastic about theology – you are very happy for me
but like my passion for 12th century architecture,
your honest desire is that I would not inflict it on you!

We have a church culture in Scotland today that doesn’t like theology.

It sees theology as at best obscure, boring and irrelevant to life, and at worst damaging and divisive, a place for religious nuts and bigots.

Over the years, panels of church leaders from all the denominations – Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox – have sat down together and discussed matters of salvation, baptism, sacraments, judgement, Holy Spirit, and Church – looking to see where there was agreement or disagreement – asking BIG questions.

But today, the response of many in the churches is “why can’t we just ditch the theology, and have a group hug?”

Well, I’ve nothing against group hugs, but...truth actually does matter!
Indeed, it *can* be a matter of life and death.

And I hope that by the time we’ve done this series of sermons,
and particularly once we start adult Sunday School in September,
you will see how important it can be
– indeed how the right type of theology, the gospel type,
is mind-bogglingly invigorating, freedom-giving and life-transforming.

So, let’s do theology.

And, if you’re still not sure you want to do it,

I’ll give you the same reply I gave Rebecca when she asked, “Daddy, *why* do we have to go there?”

That is ... “because I say so!”

Let’s start, by looking at Peter, because that’s not boring.

His story was amazing:

a fisherman, whose life was blown out of the water by Jesus.

God becomes a man, walks by Galilee and says to Peter, "I want you".
For three years, Rabbi Jesus teaches Peter,
and what a curriculum in this school:
water-walking lessons
and mass-catering classes (for 5,000)!
The class tutor is God incarnate,
and class sizes and strictly limited to 12.
Graduation involves experiencing the Resurrection,
and then being filled with the spirit of God at Pentecost.
After that, he's involved in a mission to turn the world upside down, before being
turned upside down himself.

Is this boring anyone?

Now, Peter could have left us with quite an amazing autobiography – a best-seller.
But actually, the only writings he leaves us with are two short letters – written by him,
or more likely, written in his name by some close associate.

And what is the content of these letters?
Have you guessed?
Theology!

It is as if Peter is saying:
"forget about my life for a moment.
I'm really not interested in going through it again.
I've got something more important to say.
I've got something even more exciting to share:
something that made living a life like I lived possible;
something that means that you can live it too.
And it is the very precious message of the truth of what God has done for us in Jesus
Christ.
It is the theology of God's grace in the gospel of his Son.
Now, listen up:
because this is vital."

The background to this letter is that it is written at a time when the first generation of
Christians are dead, or will soon be dead.
Those who knew Jesus personally (the apostles) are leaving the stage, and new leaders
are emerging to take their place.

And the question is: will what follows be true to what the apostles taught, and true to
what Jesus taught them?
Will the Church of a new generation follow the apostolic teaching?
Indeed, that's a question for every generation of the Church.

Evidently, there were some people who were arguing that the Church needed to adapt.
This letter speaks of false teachers who were arguing that the church needed to
modernise its teaching:
needed to dump the awkward difficult-to-believe bits,
needed to bring things up to date for the modern world.
They particularly didn't want to hear bits about Jesus coming back in judgment – that
seemed outmoded and primitive.

Does this sound familiar?

They also thought that the Church should relax a bit -
it should be willing to go with the moral flow of society

and accommodate the ethics, and particularly the sexual ethics, of the surrounding culture – make things a bit easier.

Do that, and people will join us, they said.

Does this sound a little bit familiar?

We're in an age today where people want to modernise theology:

an age where there are some big name theologians who want to downplay the coming of Jesus as judge.

There are those who downplay sin – “God is nice, he likes me because I am nice, and if we can all just do the hug thing with God and feel good about ourselves, then that'll be the gospel.”

The problem with these theologies, is the same problem that Peter had with the false teachers of his day.

It might be popular – but where does it come from?

Because it is not what Jesus said, it is not what the apostle's passed down, and so, in the end, it is just made up by the teacher, because he likes to believe it.

So, that's the background to the writing of the letter.

The writer is passionate for truth.

He is convinced that the gospel message is life-transforming

and that's why he's so fired up that in his excitement

and in his fury that anyone should want to dilute it, change it, ignore bits of it,

or to suggest that it can't transform the moral life of the Christian.

Indeed, as you read the letter, you'll see that he does not exactly mince his words when speaking of the false teachers.

The letter is probably written from Rome – and sent out to surrounding churches.

It may not exactly be written by Peter:

it has a very different style from 1st Peter – and a very similar style to letter of Jude.

So some people suggest that Jude, who was Jesus' brother, might have written it in Peter's name.

Others suggest that it may have been written by disciple of Peter.

Others suggest it may have, in fact, been written just after Peter's death.

Whatever the case, it is written with Peter's authority – in his name –

and although the early church debated whether Peter actually wrote it,

they recognised that it is apostolic teaching

and they agreed its authority by placing it into the list of books to be included in the New Testament.

OK, that was a long introduction.

So, let me summarise.

Theology matters, because the truth of what Jesus has done for us matters.

Theology needs to be true to what Jesus taught, and what the apostles hand down to us, as recorded in the Scriptures.

Getting this right, can be life transforming.

Getting this wrong, can be *very very* bad,

because getting it wrong has the potential to mess up Christian lives and prevent them becoming all that God wants them to become.

So now, let's look at the text.

VI. Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ

This introduction reminds us of where this is coming from.
Simeon – that his old Aramaic name from before he met Jesus.
Peter – that’s the name Jesus gave him.
“A servant of Jesus” – literally a humble slave,
and his “apostle” – one sent from the master with authority to speak for him.
These words remind us of the remarkable biography of Peter, the changed fisherman,
but also of the very special role he had.
He was Christ’s “rock”, the leader of his apostles.

To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ

This verse is mind-blowing.

Because behind it stands one of the most important, amazing, life-changing, fantastic, phenomenal, liberating of all theological truths:

the doctrine of justification.

If you come to all ten weeks of the Living Faith course we are going to run at Adult Sunday School, and all six sermons on 2nd Peter – and you don’t remember any of it, except this one doctrine, then that is absolutely fine, because, this one doctrine can utterly transform your life in God.

Did I mention this was important?

Let me explain.

Here is Simon Peter.

He’s just introduced himself in this letter, in a way that reminds us of his phenomenal story, and his amazing relationship to Jesus as an apostle.

Peter was there from the start.

He walked on water.

He met Moses and Elijah up on a mountain.

He saw the resurrection.

He preached the first ever Christian sermon on the day of Pentecost.

And now he says, that you (that’s us) have received a faith, just as precious as ours. Literally, in Greek it says, that your faith is “of equal standing”, “stands on the same ground” as the apostles, through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Your standing before God ... is equal to Peter’s.

Your righteousness before God ... is equal to Peter’s.

God became a man, walked along Galilee, and chose Peter, and by the faith that you’ve been given as a free gift, you stand in righteous status, before God, equal to Peter.

Now, if that isn’t theology to blow your mind, then check your pulse, because you may be dead.

My status equals Peter.

That can’t be right? Can it?

Peter wrote the Bible, I can’t even find mine!

Peter was crucified upside-down; I’m a spiritual basket case.

How can this be?

The answer is theology - the doctrine of Justification.

Here's how it works, in a nutshell.

One – we are all sinners.

If you agree with that, then you are a sinner.

If you disagree, then you are a sinner in denial.

Two – there will be a judgement.

(That's one of the themes we will explore in this letter, it is something that the false teachers denied at the time, and it is something many false teachers still deny.

Denying it doesn't change it.)

There will be a judgement, and we cannot possibly hope to stand before God of ourselves.

He is holy, he is good, he is true and he is faithful.

I am unholy, bad, false, and unfaithful.

In terms of my own righteousness before God, I am nowhere.

I deserve to be rejected, thrown from his presence; I deserve nothing from him but my destruction and dismissal.

That's what the Bible calls hell.

Why would a Holy God want to spend *any* time with me?

Let alone all eternity.

Three - God became a man in Jesus Christ.

He lived a perfect, sinless, righteous life.

He went to the cross – and something amazing happened: an amazing exchange.

Jesus took all my sin, and all its consequences, on himself.

He who never sinned, Paul tells us, became sin for us.

And at the same time, he gave us his righteousness:

his goodness, that we could never earn.

Where is my goodness?

I have none, but in Jesus Christ, I have been given as a free gift, all I need.

I am justified, before God

I am found to be innocent.

Because Christ's righteousness is imputed, is given, to me.

That's the doctrine of Justification -

God's great exchange.

And it is amazing!

If you think that this is boring theology, then you haven't got it!

This is not boring.

This is the crux of the New Testament.

Justification is *so* vital that Christianity split at the Reformation over this very issue.

John Calvin called it "the principle of the whole doctrine of salvation and the foundation of all religion."

Martin Luther said that the doctrine of justification is the issue on which the church stands or falls and that any church denying justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone can no longer be called Christian.

This is the apostolic truth, for which generations have shed their blood in martyrdom.

This is not boring!

The righteousness of Jesus is given as a free gift, equally, to all who receive it by faith.

Peter, James, John, Alistair, Margaret, Stephen, Betty and Bob – all stand on the same ground.

All receive the same precious thing, through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, our God (yes, God) and Saviour.

It is ironic really, that the Pope, who claims to be Peter's successor, is addressed as "his holiness".

Now, the Pope is a good guy, he's a brother in Christ, and I don't want to trash him: but he's a sinner just like me.

And so, if he's "holy", then it can only be because Christ died for his sins, and gave to him the gift of his righteousness.

And if that makes the Pope holy, then I stand on the same ground:

The same ground as Peter, and the same ground as the Pope.

So, may I humbly present, "his holiness, Alistair May"!

"His holiness John Shaw"

"Her Holiness Therese Reid"

"His Holiness David Gillies"?

This is amazing theology – and we've just done one verse.

And we've even missed a bit of that.

We receive this gift, by faith.

But says Peter, our faith is also received – it is given to us as a gift.

Sometimes Christians think:

"I may be a rotten sinner

but at least I've done one thing right.

I trusted Jesus

I had the good sense to decide for him.

At least, I am better than an atheist or a guy who can't decide."

Wrong says Peter.

Your faith is also a gift.

You didn't choose God – God came and got you.

Just like Jesus appeared out of the blue and called me by Galilee.

I didn't wander about choosing a Rabbi, and working out which one was the best to follow.

He came and grabbed me.

It's been amazing actually, as people have been sharing their stories at Café Church, how much of a sense there is that people came to faith, not because the Church put on a spectacular event, or did evangelism right, and certainly not because they made a wise choice, but because God intervened in their life in a way they couldn't help.

He drew them to faith.

He drew them to the church.

On one occasion, we locked the doors, but God brought them back.

He would not let them go.

His irresistible grace was doing something, and it was his doing not theirs.

But why does all this matter?

The clue is in verse two.

V2. May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord

Peace?

Does your faith give you peace?

Does it fill you with joy?

It should.

But quite honestly, sometimes Christians are miserable people.

And sometimes, the more we hear about faith and God,

the more miserable we get;

the more unworthy we feel;

the more guilty we stand;

the more useless we see ourselves.

And so, we either try harder

to do more religious things

to pray harder,

to psych ourselves up to believe harder

in the hope that we somehow might measure up to be better Christians

and stop feeling so lousy about ourselves

and so second-rate compared to others.

Or we just give up.

Or we say,

“Well, I hear that God loves me, but I’m really struggling to love myself

I know that God forgives me, but I really can’t forgive myself”.

The world is really into worrying about our self-esteem.

And the result is, we never have any peace about our Christian faith.

If that is ever how you feel, let me suggest, you need a better theology.

You need to understand the doctrine of justification

It isn’t up to us.

It isn’t about what we do.

It certainly not about how we feel.

You stand before God on the same ground as Peter, because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ our God and Saviour.

It is all about him, and not about me.

Live with it!

You are utterly forgiven,

and there is nothing left to do, and nothing left to add.

That is fantastic, and liberating, and gives

“and peace in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord”

How I feel about myself does not ultimately matter.

My self-esteem is not ultimately relevant.

(As much as society is obsessed with it.)

Because on the last day, I will stand before God, and not before a mirror.

There will not be a self-assessment questionnaire.

No one will be counting my efforts, my prayers, my worrying, or my church meetings.

He will look for my righteousness,

and I will have none

but I will point to that of Jesus Christ,

and say, by the grace of his gift, that is mine.

And then, lastly for today, verse three:

“3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

God has given power (that’s the Holy Spirit) has given us everything we need for life and godliness.

Or, he’s given us all we need for living the godly life.

Not only are we secure in Christ’s righteousness, so we don’t fear judgement on the last day, and we stand level with Peter; but right now, we have God’s power, the Holy spirit, who gives us all that we need to live the godly life that he wants for us now.

This is the same power that Peter knew on the day of Pentecost.

The same power that changed the frightened disciples to bold apostles is ours, given as a gift, and this is all we need.

That’s really fantastic theology.

“Everything we need”!

This is an all-inclusive deal.

Do you get that?

A man is told: “you’ve won a free all-inclusive holiday.”

“Fantastic” he says “How much will it cost?”

“Em? I don’t think you heard – it’s like ...free.”

“OK, wow, so all I need to pay for is the meals?”

“No! All inclusive means all inclusive, it includes the meals.”

“Right, so, dinner, bed and breakfast, and I just need to buy my own lunch?”

“I really don’t think you get this. All-inclusive means “everything is included” – that’s all the meals, all the snacks, all the ice-cream, all the crisps, and all the guacamole you can eat.”

“Ah, so, it’s just the drinks I pay for?”

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness

Let that theology sink in.

Let that assurance fill your heart.

Let the peace that gives refresh your soul.

Stop running around looking for the lunch money,
and rejoice in this truth of the gospel,
this apostolic theology.

This is not boring.

Amen