

Second Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 2:14a, 22-32, 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

What a glorious gospel reading this is today. Peace, joy, Holy Spirit and worship, all in one package.

But I am not going to speak on that this morning. If you want a sermon on it, you could do worse than read Peter's Easter 2 sermon from 2024 which is on the St Mungo's website.

Today I intend to unpack a little of the reading from Peter's first epistle. Here he places the resurrection of Jesus right where it belongs: as instigation of new birth, living hope and a secure inheritance. And after his initial greeting Peter cannot help but praise God for his great mercy which has made this possible.

Jesus spoke about new birth when he told Nicodemus (John 3:3) that in order to see the kingdom of God he must be born again. Nicodemus thought that this was something **he** had to do, but Peter writes that new birth is simply a gift from God.

What does it mean to be born again? Is it just something we say - "I'm a born-again Christian" - to indicate that we don't just go to church but have a true Christian belief? Or is there substance to it? Paul wrote to the Corinthians (2 Cor.5:17) that *if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away*. An exchange has happened. New birth brings transformation. Further on in this first letter Peter writes (1:23) *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable*.

Now, I don't know what experience Peter's readers had of seed sowing but I have brought along some of mine as a visual aid – sweet peas. These are definitely perishable. If I hadn't sown them now they wouldn't be viable for many more years. But as it is the old – the seed buried in the soil - is passing away and the new is coming – as you can see. The transformation is inherent but the new life will need to be nurtured to reach its full potential. But if it is, then the perishable seed will be transformed into a plant with glorious fragrant flowers – a new creation, a new birth.

Of course the analogy fails as an illustration of imperishable seed because, come the autumn, the sweet peas will become exhausted and die. Whereas our new birth from imperishable seed has brought us into something permanent.

Peter writes that it is through Jesus's resurrection that we have new birth **into** a living hope and **into** an inheritance. Just as when we use the phrase 'born into the world' to describe the moment of our first birth, so our new selves are born into and inhabit a living hope and an inheritance reserved for us. This is our milieu. It is the landscape of hope in which we are to live.

So what is a *living hope*? Well, it's different from normal hope. I hope that I will be able to successfully complete all the miles involved in the walking holiday I have booked in the Shetlands next month. But this is by no means certain. My age and a niggling knee problem might prevent it.

That's normal hope. Not really much more than wishful thinking. But living hope is different. It has life in and of itself because it is certain. It continues. It cannot die. It is living.

And it is current. Yes, rooted in a past event, to be sure, but currently alive. The writer to the Hebrews (6:19) describes it as *an anchor for the soul, firm and secure*. Something we can hold onto.

And where is it anchored? In heaven, with Jesus in the inner sanctuary into which he entered through his death and resurrection.

Paul wrote to the Philippians (3:20) that our citizenship is in heaven. That's where we belong. Its atmosphere is that of living hope, a certain expectation of peace, joy, freedom and the universal reign of God our Father.

Paul understands that it takes positive energy to reorient our thinking away from the world's attitude of anxiety and hopelessness to that of living hope. Particularly perhaps at the moment with the world situation as it is. We need to consciously focus on the hope of a bright future which God has already planned and engineered for us. He is in control; we can hand our fears and anxieties over to him in exchange for hope.

Not that makes everything hunky-dory. Like Peter's readers we too face grief in all kinds of trials.

Although, thank God, we do not face the sort of persecution that they were suffering. But hope, by definition, is for something future, not present. When a hope is realised it is no longer hope, but reality. When faced with all kinds of trials we should cling to our hope for our own sanity.

Likewise the inheritance into which we have been born. Although Peter writes of new birth into a living hope **and** into an inheritance, I think this is probably just Peter's way of writing to emphasise the point. Our inheritance is something for which we can have living hope.

We are accustomed to thinking of inheritance as something future – and so it is. But to Peter's Jewish readers it would have been more than just future. The word was applied to the Promised Land in the Old Testament, something that the people of Israel came to inherit, to inhabit, after passing through the Jordan river. Similarly for us now there is inheritance in the Christian life in the Holy Spirit, *who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession* as Paul writes in Ephesians (1:14)

The inheritance of the Promised Land was not unsullied. It was raided and devastated from time to time. But our inheritance is one that can never be so affected; it is imperishable, it *can never spoil or fade*. The Greek word for imperishable can also mean 'unravaged by any invading army' (Barclay). It remains pristine.

If you think of some of the inheritances of the stately homes and castles of the UK, most of them are perishing, spoiling and fading and several have been ravaged by invading armies in the past. Not so our heavenly inheritance. It is there, perfect, preserved in heaven for us. But even today we can enjoy its benefits of peace, joy and serenity as William Barclay puts it.

But this is not all. The Psalm set for today is Psalm 16 where David writes *The Lord is the portion of my inheritance*. God himself is our inheritance. That's mind-blowing, difficult – almost impossible - to get our heads round, but somehow David knew it, experienced it.

Furthermore, our inheritance is *kept in heaven for us*, or, literally, it is under a watchful guardianship in the heavens. It is not going anywhere.

And did you notice that the inheritance is not the only thing being kept? We too, *through faith are shielded by God's power*. We are being shielded by God's power as if by a watchman, alert to any threat.

We have an inheritance kept in heaven for us just as we are kept by the power of God for it. It is all down to God and his great mercy. The only requirement is to keep faith.

And the end result of faith is *the salvation of our souls*. And the word *salvation* means both deliverance and healing.

Peter's readers, who unlike Thomas, had never seen the crucified and risen Jesus, were, Peter writes, through their faith and love of Jesus, receiving this salvation with great joy. Peter uses the present tense. Salvation was their daily experience, not just a future hope.

May we, who have also not seen the crucified and risen Jesus with our physical sight, be the same. Amen

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