

18th May 2025 – Reflection: Resurrection Living (2) – 1 Peter 1:13-25 ‘Loving holiness’

If I was to ask you which quality of God’s character is mentioned most often in the New Testament of the bible, what would you guess? It’s obvious, isn’t it? – it’s *agape* love. This is the word invented by Christians in the middle of the first century to describe love as Jesus showed it. It’s the word Paul uses in his great hymn to love: love is patient, love is kind, and so on. And then we get to John’s great insight, the amazing distillation of over a thousand pages of divinely inspired scriptural revelation into this one simple phrase: *God is love*. It stands to reason, therefore, that the two great commands given to human beings – who are made in God’s image, the God who is in his very being love – are these: love God and love your neighbour. Even the Pharisees knew that.

But you’d be wrong. Yes, the word *agape* is mentioned a lot – 259 times – in the New Testament. But there’s another word mentioned even more, 261 times – and that is the word ‘holy’.

Funny isn’t it, that we all know that God is *agape*, God is love, but **even in the New Testament, there are more references to holiness**. That’s primarily because the word used to name Christian believers in the New Testament, which most bible translations translate as ‘saints’ is in fact the word *hagioi* – which means holy ones. Not *agapoi* – loving ones – but holy ones. In other words, the single most compelling characteristic used to define Christians in the New Testament, i.e. the first and original generation of the church, is that we are *holy*.

And perhaps that’s something that we feel a bit unsure about. Unlike some Christian words like hope, joy, peace, and of course love, which have almost universally positive connotations, the word holy or holiness gets more of a mixed press. In part that’s because we’ve all heard the sort of lazy theology which contrasts the ‘holy’ God of the Old Testament with the ‘loving’ God of the New. But it’s also because we carry images of the word ‘holy’ which aren’t flattering: we think uptight, sanctimonious, po-faced, a whole list of ‘oughts and can’ts’.

But the thing is, Jesus was the holiest person who ever lived – so maybe the problem is with our definition? So, let’s go back to basics – **what does the word holy mean? It means set apart – particularly set apart for God**. That is why God’s very essence is defined as holy, because God is uniquely set apart from all of his creation – yes, creation is good, but only the Lord God is perfect.

Naturally, when this God sends his Spirit it is known as the – you guessed it – *Holy Spirit*. And whatever God blesses can also be holy, following the pattern of its maker. The first thing named to be holy in scripture is the Sabbath – when God rests from his work after creating the world, he blessed the seventh day and made it holy (as an aside, that is why what we’ve done to our Sundays in the last 30 years is reaping such havoc with our wellbeing – imagine trashing the very first thing in the universe that God makes holy?). But as scripture unfolds, we learn that God’s *name* is holy, the *law* is holy – and also, God calls his *people* to be holy: ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ is how God describes them to Moses just before the giving of the Ten Commandments.

That was 1,200 years before Jesus, but his great friend Peter is still working with the same frame of reference when he introduces our passage for today quoting God’s words from the Old Testament law: **‘Be holy because I am holy.’ If the fundamental call of the Christian life is to become more like Jesus – then we grow not *just* in love, or joy or peace or hope, but in holiness too.**

And in this passage, we see three main justifications for the importance of holiness. The first is very much like last week's theme. If the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our living hope, the death of Jesus is the foundation of our holiness: (v18) 'For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.' Our salvation cost Jesus everything. The only truly and perfectly holy person who ever lived gave his life that we might be set free. **We are holy as a thankful response to what Jesus did for us.**

Second, we are holy because God is holy. If our calling is to become more like Jesus, then it follows that **not only do we become more loving, more peaceful, more joyful, but also more holy.** So Peter summarises for us: 'Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.'

Third, holiness is wise living. Peter contrasts holy living with the alternative – he talks about the 'evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance' (v14). We don't lead holy lives just to live longer or be happier, but we can't ignore the fact that **living holy lives does tend to be good for us.** There's nothing wrong with enjoying God's good world, but abusing those enjoyments damages us. Holy living is wise living.

There's lots for us to chew on in those reflections. But, and this is important, Peter doesn't stop there. He finishes this section with one final reflection on holiness: (v22) 'Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.' **Ultimately, holiness is made perfect in love.** Too often we talk about holiness and love as things that are somehow in conflict with each other. We have these parodies of 'holy' churches which are all rules and repression and fire and brimstone, and 'loving' churches which are all fluffy and anything goes and don't really believe much at all.

Peter doesn't see it like that – in fact, Jesus doesn't. Holiness and love go together, hand-in-hand. Two sides of the same coin, they complete each other. Real holiness is seeped in love. We love because we are holy, we are holy because we love. Love which does not call people to live holy lives is not love at all – if God thinks something is wrong, we have to be brave and humble enough to trust God on that. Equally, holiness which is not saturated in humble, gracious, self-giving love is not true holiness, just a diet version of the real thing. Holy people love deeply, from the heart.

This is what the new, born-again life of a follower of Jesus looks like. We are born again to something eternal, imperishable, founded on the Word of God, which endures forever. It's interesting that Peter still refers to us in this passage, like he did last week, as 'foreigners'. This kind of lifestyle, this blend of love and holiness is unusual. And in a week, when questions of nationality and identity have dominated our news, let's finish by reflecting that, according to Peter, the leader appointed by Jesus as the first shepherd of the body of Christ, all followers of Jesus are foreigners. That is our identity, and we should be proud of it, because it is the name given to us by the Lord, who brings people from all nations into his kingdom.

So as the global body of Christ, all of us strangers and foreigners here on earth, let's recommit ourselves again today to loving holiness – to being holy because Jesus is holy, and to loving one another deeply, from the heart. And may the Lord grant us all grace to follow in the footsteps of Peter, and all the saints (the holy ones), who have gone before us, this week. Amen.