

Signposting

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[0 : 00] you have your sermon outline in front of you that might help as well. But let me pray now and let's ask God again to speak to us. Father, we thank you that every word of yours comes from your mouth, that what we have in front of us is your inspired word.

We are so privileged to have you speak to us in this way. And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to listen well, to pay attention to all those words, that indeed that word which has given us new birth will also be the same word that will continue to help us to mature and to taste that you are good.

So we pray all this now in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. When I was at university, there was a Chinese takeaway down the road from me. So whenever I miss eating something Chinese and I didn't want to taste my own cooking, that's where I'll go.

But what amused me about this Chinese takeaway was that it seemed to have a perpetual identity crisis. Before I arrived at uni, I was told that this place was called Friends.

But by the time I got there, it had been renamed Walk 22. I guess Friends didn't sound like a Chinese takeaway at all. And then after a while, the owner decided that 22 was not good enough and he renamed it Walk 23.

[1 : 22] And then years later, he decided, oh, the name still isn't hip enough. And so he renamed it yet again, this time to Walk and Roll. It just couldn't decide what it wanted to be.

Sometimes church can be a bit like that. We can go through a perpetual identity crisis. Who should we be? Are we just a convenient meeting place for people who happen to believe in the same things?

Are we exactly like that Dayak Vidayu National Association, just down the road from us? Just that our association is for Christians, not just Vidayus. Or are we more like a political party, organising people to work together to achieve a common democratic cause?

Are we like a religious version of GPS or PSB? Or are we a place, both physically and virtually, for people to sing nice songs, to chat with their friends and meet people's felt spiritual needs in Jesus' name?

Who should we be? Or should we be one thing this year and another thing the next? How can we decide? Well, today as we finish off our Church Recept series, we are going to think a little about that.

[2 : 43] So far, we've reminded ourselves what it means to be church. We've asked what church is, and we're reminded that we are a people who belong to Jesus and belong to one another.

We are a people who gather together in the name of Jesus to know his presence and encourage one another. We've looked at what church should be like.

A church that welcomes with the welcome of God without any favouritism. And we look at a couple of aspects of what church should do together, including singing and praying.

And as we wrap up this series, here's the question that we're going to answer today. Who does God ultimately want us to be? And we're going to discover that while having a reset is good, especially after having the last two years disrupted by the pandemic, what we don't need is a wholesale reinvention.

Because whatever the crisis, our identity remains the same. It's the one that God has given us. And so to be reminded of what that identity is, we're going to look at 1 Peter 2, verse 9 to 12 this morning, just four verses.

[3 : 56] And so make sure that passage is in front of you, and we're going to find out who does God ultimately want us to be. And notice, first of all, how verse 9 begins.

But you. And that tells us right away we're in the middle of a conversation. You only say, but you, in response to something that was said before. So what did we miss?

Well, we need to back up a little. So far, in 1 Peter 2, verse 4 to 6, Peter has told us that Jesus Christ is the living stone. In fact, he's the cornerstone, the foundation of God's people.

He is whom God is building on as he raises us to be a living temple, with each Christian a living stone. But, verses 7 and 8, not everyone accepts this cornerstone.

Quite a few see Jesus purely as a rock of offence, and they reject him. And those who reject Jesus stumble and tumble down.

[5 : 01] Becoming like uprooted trees with nothing to stand on. But you, Peter now says, that's not who you are.

You're not uprooted trees. In other words, you're not pagans. Later on in verse 12, Peter will say, live such good lives among the pagans.

And to phrase it that way implies that the people he's speaking to are not pagans, or at least pagans no longer. They are differentiated from them.

And so we're not pagans. We're not uprooted trees. Or, to use the language of verse 8, we're not people who disobey the message any longer. Whatever our identity, it has to be at odds with those. It has to be opposite to those. So, who are we then? Well, Peter says, here's a list. Verse 9.

[6 : 03] Back in 1 Peter 1 verse 3, Peter tells us that as Christians, we've had a new birth.

We've been made new. But now in 1 Peter 2 verse 9, what's really interesting is that our new birth actually leads to something old.

You see, Peter did not pick these descriptions out of nowhere. Every single one of them comes from the Old Testament, particularly Exodus 19 and Isaiah 43.

And every single one of them originally applied to Israel. And so let's take the first and the fourth of those descriptions first, because they come as a pair.

But you are a chosen people, Peter says. That's a description straight out of Isaiah 43 verse 20. In Isaiah 43, God promised Israel that he will be their saviour.

[7 : 10] He will lead them out of exile. He's going to perform a second exodus, guiding and providing for them in the wilderness. And he's going to do it, he says in Isaiah, because these are the people he has chosen.

But they're not chosen because of any merit in themselves. By calling them chosen, God is picking up on language he's already used in Deuteronomy.

For example, in 7 verse 6 to 8, and 10 verse 15. There, we find out that God has set his heart upon them. He's given them his total affection.

Not because they're so great or they're so lovable, but because he's the faithful, covenant-keeping God. That's why they're chosen.

And now Peter says to us, Church, guess what? This description, this designation now applies to you. You are a chosen people, not because you chose yourselves, but because God chose you.

[8 : 23] Not because you're so lovable, but because God loves you. And that's the difference between us and those uprooted trees earlier.

The only reason we are who we are is because God intervened and set his saving love on us. He planted a seed of faith in us, caused us to be born again, right up into a living hope, no longer to be a plant that withers.

And we can take no credit for it. And that means there can be zero pride on our part. God, it should awaken wonder and humility in us.

And as we will see later, it should awaken praises to God. For we are his chosen people. And just as significantly, we are his special possession.

Or more literally, a people for God's special possession. Peter now combines language found in both Isaiah 43 and Exodus 19.

[9 : 33] In Exodus 19 verse 5, Israel is described as a treasured possession. And so the idea is that God owns us. We are not our own.

But God doesn't just own us. He delights in us. In the ancient world, kings often had vast collections. But there would be a few objects in their collection that he particularly loves.

Those are his special possessions. And so when God calls Israel his treasured possession, he's saying, you are my pride and joy.

And Isaiah 43 verse 21 picks up on this language and tells us, despite humanity's repeated sin and failure, God still intends to form for himself such a people.

He intends to form us into such a treasure. And once again, Peter says, guess what, church? This is you.

[10:40] You've been chosen. You've been rescued. You're deeply valued. You know, there are days when we need to hear that truth. Don't we? There are days when the church seems to be nothing more than a laughingstock or an embarrassment.

There are days when it feels like something to be ashamed of. Sometimes that is self-inflicted because we act in ways that do not resemble our Father in Heaven at all.

There is no family likeness. But God says, hey, that's not the reason I chose you and delight in you in the first place.

I didn't choose you because you were such honourable people. No, it is by grace alone. And by grace alone, I'm going to shape you into something fit for a king.

And hey, maybe that's a good reason for you and I to delight in the local church as weak as it may look sometimes, as awkward as it may act sometimes, as infuriating as it may even be sometimes.

[11:59] For God says, this feeble, frail, frustrating, fallible church is still the apple of my eye.

But that doesn't exhaust who we are. We still have the middle two descriptors in verse 9 and they come as a pair as well because both come from Exodus 19.

Let's take royal priesthood first. What is the role of a priest in the Old Testament? Well, he's to be set apart. And he's not set apart to be cut off from the world, but set apart for the sake of the world so that many others will know God's blessing.

And he does that by interceding and by instructing. And God says, actually, in a sense, that's what you're meant to be, Israel, even if not all of you are officially priests.

You are to be totally devoted to me, to become an object lesson in itself so that the entire world will know of my presence.

[13:14] And Peter says, that's now our role. We are a royal priesthood. We channel blessing to the world as we make the world aware that God is here with us.

And our calling is nothing less than royal because we serve at the pleasure of the King of Kings. We serve to make him known. And this outward focus is also present in the other descriptor, a holy nation.

Once again, we have the idea of being set apart. That's what holy means. Now, this idea is not as foreign as it might seem because to this day, we are still setting things apart.

We set apart special isolation wards for those with infectious diseases. We set apart business class on an aeroplane for those willing to pay for greater privileges.

And so, God's people are to be set apart as well to live distinctive lives. But setting apart is different from setting aside.

[14:25] We're not to be hidden away. Instead, as one commentator nicely puts it, Israel is meant to be a display people. They are like those cars in a showroom designed to showcase the very best qualities of Jamaica.

because God is holy, they are to be holy, which, as the rest of Exodus and Leviticus will tell us, includes not just taking the Lord's name, not taking the Lord's name in vain, but also having concern for the foreigner made in God's image.

It means sexual faithfulness and integrity, but also integrity in the courts and taking care of the poor. So it's both personal and social.

And those who bear Jesus' name are meant to showcase our Saviour in the same way as well. And this outward focus is made especially clear at the end of verse 10.

What is the reason for our existence, Peter asks, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

[15:45] Once again, that's language straight from Isaiah 43 verse 21. And that helps us to recognise our intended audience. In Isaiah, it's Babylon who hears those praises.

It's the unbelieving world around them. And so it is in 1 Peter. It's the same. We are to declare how amazing it is that God has released us from captivity to sin and death and brought us into his kingdom so that the world will hear.

And when we worship together in church and when we share the gospel with others outside, we are declaring his praises, not just for ourselves or to ourselves, but for others.

And that word declare in verse 10 suggests an inescapably verbal element.

Our witnessing must eventually involve words. I was once in a restaurant and I was trying to find the toilet and I did find it, but the problem was that they didn't tell me which one was for males and which one was for females.

[17:04] They just put pictures and the problem was this wasn't your standard boy girl picture. The pictures used were kind of this weird androgynous mix so you couldn't quite tell whether that picture was a guy or girl.

Or check out this picture that's coming up on the screen. Now, anyone has any idea what the sign is trying to say? Is it stop or go? I have no idea.

Words that are clear will definitely help. And so, using words will make clearer what our praises are declaring.

You can take that picture off now, Melvin, thanks. But how can we declare his praises? Well, imagine that you wanted to buy a new vacuum cleaner.

You search high and low for a good one, and out of desperation, you order a model that you've never heard before on Shopee. But when you started using it, it turns out to be the most amazing vacuum cleaner that you've ever used.

[18:08] It reliably sucks up everything that needs to be sucked up. It gets into all the hard spaces. It doesn't use much electricity. It is just a dream. And so, what you can't help but do is to sing its praises.

You leave a five-star review online, you would enthusiastically recommend it to others. You want everyone to know how excellent this vacuum cleaner is. And that's how a church declares the praises of God.

The more we know and experience him, the more we realise how good he is. And the more we truly experience God's goodness, the more we will naturally praise him.

God's God's love. And so, let's bring all this together. Who are we? Well, first of all, I hope it's clear that we are who Israel was intended to be.

Peter is being very intentional here. It's no accident that all these descriptors come from the Old Testament. He's saying we have the privilege of being the culmination of who Israel is meant to be.

[19:18] We are chosen, we are valued, we are beloved. In Malaysia, we like to give people titles, don't we? Here is Tun Datuk Patengi Tan Sri, so-and-so, with an MBBS and a PhD after his name.

Well, in Christ, look at all the titles we have. But we're not just chosen and valued, we are a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

Now, put another way, we are not just God's beloved, we are God's signposts, for we are chosen for the benefit of others. We are possessed by God to be his witness.

We are meant to be a beloved signposts to God in this world. With all that we are, we are meant to be like a flashing neon sign that keeps saying, Jesus, Jesus.

That's who we are, a beloved signposts to God in this world. So that's who we're called to be, that's our identity, that's the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of the sermon this morning.

[20:35] But that's not where Peter stops. In verses 11 to 12, he now urges us to act as that signpost to God in this world.

You see, although we know that this is our identity, we have trouble acting as that signposts sometimes, don't we? We know God is good, but we sometimes have trouble believing that.

And the reason for that is because while we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, we are at the very same time foreigners and exiles.

That's what verse 11 tells us. Now, what's the implication of that? Simple. If we are foreigners and exiles, that simply means this culture is not our culture.

And so we will never feel totally at home here. For as long as we live in this present age, this world is not our home. And so there is constant pressure to assimilate, to fit in more with where we currently live.

[21:53] The Christians whom Peter were writing to knew that. They were all first generation converts. Many of them likely came from Gentile backgrounds. Or if some of them were Jews, they probably previously lived a pagan lifestyle.

1 Peter 4 verse 3 gives us a glimpse into the communities they used to be part of. This is what Peter says, for you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do, living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.

So that's what they were like, that's how they used to live. But now that they've forsaken all that, now that they've identified as a royal priesthood or a holy nation, what's the result? Well, verse 4 tells us, they are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless while living and a heap abuse on you.

You see, now that they are Christians, they would have felt the pain of rejection from their old communities because they no longer live as their former culture did. And so they would have been tempted to retreat a little, not to be such a prominent signpost, so that the pain that they felt would be just a little lessened.

[23 : 19] It's still the same today, isn't it? Perhaps we've encountered some hostility from extended family because they perceived that we somehow betrayed our cultural heritage or failed to show appropriate respect to our ancestors when we became Christian.

Or perhaps we've experienced incredulity from some of our peers who thought that, oh, you were a smart and educated person but who can't quite believe that you now agree with some religious superstition.

And so the temptation is to lay low. And that's why verse 11, Peter has to urge us not to give in to that temptation.

Dear friends, he says, keep the neon lights on your signpost on. Don't give up. And he then highlights two things in particular we should do to keep acting as that signpost.

Firstly, he says, verse 11, fight sin. Fight sin. Abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul.

[24 : 31] Don't forget, he says, that hostility doesn't just come from others but from within yourself. Earlier in 1 Peter 2, verse 1, Peter talks about getting rid of malice and deceit and hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

In other words, he's talking about fighting relational sins, the kind that puts other people down and talks bad about them. And that's the kind of stuff that so easily changes the direction of our signposts, from God to something else.

And fight the sin to bite back when we are bitten. If we read through 1 Peter as a whole, we'll know that the church was being persecuted and it often took verbal form.

They were being insulted, ridiculed, mocked. And if we decide that it's time to do the exact same thing and engage in a culture war, fighting insult with insult, then we are in danger of going to war against the wrong enemy.

For in the end, it is our sinful desires that wage war against our souls, not mere flesh and blood. But, if we choose to resist engaging in any of this kind of behaviour, even when we are scorned, we don't scorn back, well, that's the kind of behaviour that makes the world sit up and take notice.

[26 : 07] And that's when we begin to truly act as God's signposts. And secondly, Peter says, live lives of goodness, live lives of goodness.

Verse 12, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

So here's the idea. We said earlier, words matter. But that doesn't mean our lives don't matter. rather we're meant to live such good lives that it provokes questions.

For actually in the end we can't divorce our lips from our lives. In many ways that's what the rest of 1 Peter 2 is all about. If we were to read on in chapter 2 verses 13 to 17, we are to live lives that honour the emperor, our leaders, even though he doesn't like us.

In 2 verses 18 to 21, we live lives that persevere under harsh masters, even though that is not favourable to us. And as we do so, 1 Peter 3 verse 15 tells us, we must be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks us for the reason for the hope that we have.

[27 : 25] For if we obey a heartless emperor and submit to a harsh master, then surely we must have some sort of hope beyond our present circumstances.

Right? And that is the best form of evangelism. I think for many of us, we've become used to what we call event evangelism.

In other words, we think that as long as we invite someone to some church event where someone will preach the gospel, that's all we have to do. You know, it saves us work. But while obviously there is still a place for events, if there wasn't, we wouldn't bother putting on the Tessie Talk event that we've been advertising in church.

And yes, while there is still a place for those events, evangelism happens best in the context of relationships where people see you living out your godly lives day to day. Because they can see that Jesus is real to you, that he matters to you, that he impacts the way you act towards others. And that in turn will give what you share real credibility.

[28 : 46] That will help you to be that signpost that points towards God because they'll see that you are a trustworthy signpost such that although some might accuse us of doing wrong, they may see our good deeds and glorify God when Jesus comes back again.

In other words, they will turn to Jesus. And so those are the two things that Peter urges us to do. And when we work at those, we also battle the two temptations that can stop us being signpost. You see, when we fight sin, we are at the same time battling the temptation to not be distinctive. We show that becoming part of his people truly makes a difference to our speech, our conduct, our lifestyles, our priorities. In the first few centuries, the surrounding societies certainly took notice of the Christians.

They were shocked to see Christians refuse to attend bloody gladiatorial combats, which was the entertainment of the time, to see that they were willing to cut off business ties for the sake of integrity, to claim that there is only one God in a highly polytheistic society.

[30 : 14] And when we live lives of godness among the pagans, we are at the same time battling the temptation to not be visible.

That's the other temptation. A signpost is of no use if no one sees it. And it's certainly of no use if we just huddle together every Sunday or just meet in Bible study groups, sheltered from the world, having zero contact with them.

No, that cannot be right if we are indeed to be that royal priesthood. And so my brothers and sisters, perhaps take some time this week to think about your circles of relationships.

Think about your family circle, your workplace circle, and your recreational circle. Think about the people in those circles and consider how can you live a life that will provoke questions from them. Consider what sort of questions are they most likely to ask you? Am I ready to give an answer to their questions? And then also ask, is there a way that I can involve my Christian friends in those circles, if those circles have non-Christians in them, so that we can together be this royal priesthood and holy nation?

[31 : 41] After all, evangelism doesn't have to be solitary. Remember, we are a signpost together, not just individually. Now perhaps as we're hearing this, we are feeling a little down beat.

We hear all this talk about fighting sin and living such good lives, and we think, oh no, I've blown it, I've failed to be distinctive, I've failed to be visible.

Perhaps if we're in church leadership, we can feel that we've not done what we can to help our church be that signpost. and it can be easy to be discouraged by today's passage.

In which case, Peter wants us to remember verse 10. Once you were not a people, but now you're the people of God.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Remember, that is who we are.

[32 : 43] We are people who proclaim the gospel, because we are people who have received the gospel. And in the gospel, God says there is grace, there is mercy, because that has always been God's character.

Once again, Peter is quoting the Old Testament, this time from Hosea, when he says verse 10. And he's saying it's still the same God.

And the gospel is not for people who have succeeded at fighting sin and living such good lives all the time. If so, then what do we need Jesus for? No, it is for people who need mercy.

And here's the good news, it is available in Christ. So my brothers and sisters, who do we want to be?

What does God ultimately want us to be? Well, as we come to the end of this series, I hope we've come to a clearer grasp of that answer. We belong to God.

[33 : 50] We're his assembly. We're his possession. And that's all because of Jesus. In him, we have received God's mercy.

And that's why we sing, that's why we pray, and ultimately that's why we act as his signposts. because we want as many people as possible to know him and give him the glory.

So let's pray that we might be that signpost to God in this world. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you again for your words.

thank you again for the Lord Jesus, who is our cornerstone. And thank you that because we are built on him, we're now a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.

So we pray, Lord, that you would help us to fulfill the purpose for which you have formed us for, to declare your praises who called us out of darkness into your wonderful light.

[35 : 06] Help us to abstain from sinful desires to live such good lives among the unbelieving world that no one can be in doubt that you are the good and faithful God who has saved us.

So once again, we pray, Lord, that you would help us, even in our weakness, to act as such people. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.