

2PETER 3:1-10 CBC 14.3.2021

Do you still believe in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ? Perhaps you're familiar with the words of the Creed: *"He will come again to judge the living and the dead."* Do you really believe that?

Fifty years ago in churches we heard a great deal about the second coming of Christ. Much of the teaching was accompanied by complicated charts, lurid pictures, and obscure quotations from apocalyptic literature, and frankly, a lot of it was pretty far-fetched.

Yet today we hear very little about Christ's return. Perhaps there's been a reaction to the earlier frenzy – but I fear we've thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Not many songs or books or prayers are focusing on Christ's return as the hope of our lives, the Day for which we should be longing and preparing.

Theologically liberal churches have by and large ceased believing in any literal return of Christ to judge the living and the dead. Many church leaders and theologians would scoff at the idea. And those of us who are committed to the biblical doctrine *in our head* don't always reflect that in our lives. What difference did the promise of Christ's return make to how you lived last week? How did it affect your decision making? The way you did your job? Your parenting? Did it fuel your worship? Did it make you a person of hope and courage? Did it give you a source of unquenchable joy? Well did it? Do you *really* believe in the Second Coming of Christ?

Well, if this great hope is growing dim in your heart, help is at hand in 2Peter 3. Peter's readers were under attack at this very point. Scoffers and cynics were raising doubts in their minds. *"If Jesus is coming back, where has He got to? He's taking a long time!"* If that was a problem in the first century, how much more two thousand years later! Surely it's time to give up, isn't it? That's what was said then and now. Perhaps that's what you think, deep down – even if you'd frighten yourself if you admitted it.

But Peter is a good pastor. He's not afraid to name the elephant in the room, and he knows how to shoo the elephant out of the door. He dares to articulate our unspoken fear – the scoffers' question, *"Where has Jesus got to?"* And he writes to restore our confidence in Christ's return. How? By getting our attention off the cynics and on to God. He wants us to remember what God has SAID ... what God has DONE ... what God IS LIKE.

1. REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS SAID vv.1-3

1 Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. 2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles. 3 Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.

Peter believes in REMEMBRANCE! In the Christian life we need to be good at forgetting some things (such as the wrongs done to us by others) and remembering others (what God has revealed in Christ and in Scripture). Our whole problem is that we get these things the wrong way round: we remember our hurts and forget what God has said and done!

So Peter reminds us of God's word through the prophets (v.2) – that's shorthand for the Old Testament Scriptures. And through the apostles who were commissioned by Jesus to teach what He had said and done (Mt 28:19) – which for us amounts to the New Testament Scriptures.

What will you find in the Old Testament and the New Testament? That God says that in Christ He has a big future in store for the world:

- The Old Testament is always looking forward in hope! It predicts a Messiah – our Lord Jesus. It predicts the Day of the Lord – when God will destroy evil, swallow up death, dry every tear. There'll

be a new heaven and earth. And the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea!

- What about the New Testament? Did Jesus speak much of the future? Yes! He spoke continually of His leaving and His return. Did the apostles speak of this? Yes! Their letters are forward looking, full of eager anticipation:
 - Paul: *"Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ ..."* (Php 3:20).
 - John: *"When Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is"* (1Jn 3:2).
 - And here's Peter writing a whole chapter on the return of Jesus.

So Peter urges us to pay attention to what God has said rather than to what contemporary cynics are saying. And if we ask why, he reminds us of the deep divide between the prophets and apostles on the one hand, and the false teachers on the other:

- 1:16 the apostles were eyewitnesses of the things they describe;
- 1:21 the prophets were carried along by God's Spirit (often to very uncomfortable places!);
- 3:3 BUT the scoffers are driven by their own evil desires.

Is that quite fair to the scoffers? Consider this quotation from the writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley: *"I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; and consequently assumed that it had none ... For myself, as no doubt for most of my friends, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom"* (from his book "Ends and Means").

That's the human heart. We follow our desires and try to shape reality around what we want. The genuine word of God won't let us do that. All of us will find that it challenges our desires at many points, whatever our temperament and personality.

The scoffers are motivated by their evil desires. God is motivated by love, and He tells us the truth, which is that Jesus is returning. So remember what God has said.

2. REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS DONE vv.4-7

4 They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

The scoffers say, *"The universe just keeps running like a machine. Everything goes on and on."* Many people think like this. They assume we live in a universe which is self-existent, self-sustaining, with no interventions from the outside by God. The universe is the ultimate reality.

It sounds so innocuous – but the results of this way of thinking are disastrous. We can't make any sense of life if we don't know where we've come from and where we're going to. That's why a sense of meaninglessness has taken hold of so many people in our day, and caused so many false answers to the way to live and die.

Satan has been very cunning in the last 200 years or so. He has persuaded people that there is no Creator, so that they're cut off from their roots. And he has persuaded them there's no judgment day, so that they're cut off from their destiny. They owe no-one in terms of their origin, and they're accountable to no-one for how they live. There's nothing waiting for them at the end. And this has been an effective piece of work. Without a knowledge of the Creator or Judgement Day – and that's

most of our neighbours – what is life about? There's no meaning, no purpose, no objective morality (only personal preferences), no justice, no ultimate value, and no hope for anyone. We can't make any sense of life on that basis.

Peter meets this head on by reminding us of what God has done. He outlines the Bible's big picture, and it's a brilliant framework that makes sense of life. He says we've come from somewhere and we're going somewhere. He mentions two fixed points which are ultimate realities:

- v.5 God's creation of the world. The universe doesn't exist by accident but by love. You exist because you're wanted.
- and v.7 God's judgement of the world. It matters how you live your life, and how you relate to the God who made you!

And if we ask, "*How do we know these things are true?*" v.6: The God who made the world has already held us to account. The lesson taught by the flood is that this is a MORAL universe – sin cannot go unpunished forever, - it didn't in the past, and it won't in the future (cf. Mt 24.37-39). And it's the message of the gospel that the God who made the world in love has sent a Saviour in love – His own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ – to bear our sins and bring forgiveness and life for all who trust in Him. He's given proof of this by raising Him from the dead – and Peter was one of the eyewitnesses. Peter KNOWS this is the true story of life, the universe and everything!

What the gospel does is give us a perspective, a framework in which to live. We've come FROM God (Creation) and we're going TO God (the Judgment Day). And in between we're not on our own, because God is NOT shut out from His world – He's active in it, every moment of every day.

SO remember what God has SAID – He has promised Jesus will return in glory! And remember what God has DONE – He created the world and has already shown His power to judge it.

And if you're still saying, "*But why doesn't He come NOW – why the long wait?*" –

3. REMEMBER WHAT GOD IS LIKE vv.8-9

So many of our problems stem from an inadequate view of God – we make him too small. The long wait for Christ's return isn't caused by God's unfaithfulness or weakness, but by his GREATNESS.

- **Remember God's ETERNITY: 8** *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*

That's not a philosophical statement about God and time – the point is pastoral. Peter quotes from Ps 90 in which God's suffering people cry out to God in their pain. And they say what *we* say in our pain: "*How long must we wait?*"

And one of the answers God gives through the psalmist is that we need to consider what God does from *God's* perspective, not our own. We make ourselves the measure of everything – but in reality, we're not. Our perspective on life is limited to a moment of time and a handful of experiences. The wait seems long to us!

But what's the perspective of the eternal God who surveys and rules over all of human history. Does He think He's taking too long? Is He frustrated by hold-ups He hadn't foreseen, or circumstances beyond His control? If Jesus waits another 2000yrs, will that seem a long time to God? Hardly.

Peter wants us to see that God has a much better perspective on time than we have. It's really very foolish to judge the Eternal God by human standards!

- **Remember God's PATIENCE: 9** *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

It isn't slackness but PATIENCE that delays the end of history. v.9 gives us a deeper understanding of the present age than almost any other verse in the Bible. If you ask, "What in the world is God doing?" – He's holding open the door for longer so that more people can turn to Him. If we take that seriously, evangelism will leap to the top of the church's agenda.

And Peter makes this personal: he says God is patient with *you*. He held off His judgement long enough for YOU to come in – and me too! Aren't you glad? God didn't owe us that grace. It was His sovereign mercy. And though both salvation *and* judgement are acts of God's sovereign will, He doesn't delight when people perish. Some *will* perish – in v.7 Peter has spoken of the destruction of the ungodly. But God's delight is in people turning to Him, and He gives them every opportunity. Whoever wants to may come – if people refuse, that's their own doing.

But today God patiently holds the door open till all His purposes are fulfilled, and in the end the harvest will be full and glorious. There are people coming in every day. No doubt some of them were once scoffers – they laughed at the idea of God's patience. Now they're thanking Him for it!

SO Peter says: If we're losing heart because Jesus hasn't returned yet, we should pause to remember God. Remember what He has said. Remember what He has done. Remember what He is like. Think on His greatness – his eternity and patience. God's timetable isn't ours. What we think of as God's delay is really His astonishing patience and mercy.

BUT THE END WILL COME! v.10

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Peter heard Jesus say that He will come with the unpredictability of a burglar, catching the scoffers unawares. And having offered Himself to us as our Saviour, He will return as our Judge, giving His verdict on our response to Him.

That day of Judgement will make the flood of Noah's day look small. Peter uses vivid language to describe the indescribable. Every hiding place disappearing. Every mask burned up. No more pretence. No-one able to go on living in unreality and denial. The truth made plain. Everything laid bare to the eyes of the Judge. Justice perfectly done and seen to be done. The final setting right of everything.

The devil mocks the future (*Ge 3: "Do what you like – there'll be no consequences"*). But the person who loves us most, the Lord Jesus Christ, says *"Take me and it will be glory; refuse me and it will be endless sorrow."* Why does He talk like this? Because He loves us. Enough to die for us. Enough to return for us, so that we can be with Him forever.

So v.10 is both a warning and an assurance. It warns us not to presume on God's patience, but to take the Saviour He offers while that door is still open to us. God has no desire that you or anyone else should perish – so turn to Him before it's too late. And then v.10 will become a joyful promise to you – an assurance that your Saviour really is returning for you, like a Bridegroom coming for His Bride.

And if that's your future, it gives you courage to live and direction for how to spend your life – and that's the closing verses of this letter which we'll look at next week.

PRAYER: Forgive us, Father, when we lose sight of the coming of our Lord – when we listen to the scoffers rather than the Scriptures. Stir up our hearts by your Spirit to read your promises every day; to meditate on them and to be shaped by them. And give us such a love for our Lord Jesus that we will live for His return. We pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:

- What difference would it make if you lived for Christ's return?
- How can we remind each other of this great truth?