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Holy As I Am Holy (1 Peter 1.1-9, 13-16)

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The first five books of the New Testament are packed with action and story. The gospels tell of Jesus' birth and his irruption into the history of Israel, into the life of the world. They tell the story of his ministry and its doings. In the process we get glimpses into a hundred other characters and their stories – Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah and John the Baptist, the disciples who are called to follow; and the many who are touched or helped by Jesus – Zaccheus the tax collector, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the woman with a haemorrhage, the man born blind (to name a few), all culminating in the story of Jesus' own death and resurrection. In the Acts of the Apostles, we're also told stories – tales from the birth of the Christian movement, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the conversion of Saul, the travels and mission trips of Peter, Paul and others, and their encounters with gaolers and governors and the artisans of Asia Minor. These histories are punctuated by stories within the story – the parables of Jesus, the dreams of Peter and Pilate's wife, the teaching discourses and sayings.

But then, there's an abrupt shift in genre. After the book of Acts, we move from narrative to epistle. With the exception of the book of Revelation at the very end of the New Testament, the rest of the Christian scriptures are comprised of letters – letters written by Paul, Peter, John and others, to the fledging Christian communities they founded around the Mediterranean. The content is no longer narrative and action based, but instructive. And I confess I find this literature much harder to get into. Its exhortations and encouragements can seem misdirected if not downright bossy; the explanation of the Christ-event alienating if not impenetrable. All of which means I feel the need to offer you a little account of why I'm proposing a short Easter series on the first letter of Peter!

The idea was first suggested by the lectionary – this is the New Testament text set for the next few weeks. But what drew me to want to engage it, is its explicit focus on the question of ‘holy living’ or Christian virtue. The author of 1 Peter tells his readers early on that now they have received what he calls ‘a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’, they are being called to a new *quality* of life. This seemed to me interesting, particularly in the context of the world’s current crisis, which is raising plenty of questions about how we’re to live well both now and into the future.

Some of you will know I’m also exploring these themes in a series of talks for the World Community for Christian Meditation. In my blurb for that series, I suggested that our crisis is not only about health. It’s one that reminds us of the interconnectedness of the human family, and of the human and natural worlds; it confronts us with structural injustices built into our economic system, the fragility of our whole way of life. The global response to the crisis helps us realise that we could make some different choices about these things; we could cooperate in a more abundant and shared flourishing. But we know very well that we could also simply ‘snap back’ to the way things were. At present, then, we are in a liminal space. If we want a different world on the other side this crisis, it will matter how many of us can see and commit to a deeper goodness. What I’m interested to explore, with the help of 1 Peter, is whether a deepened sense of ‘holy living’ will empower us in this commitment.

I’ve used the phrase ‘Christian virtue’ and I’m conscious this might raise hackles. Obviously, concern for character and values, questions about ‘virtue’ and the good life, are not exclusive to Christianity. Philosophical and religious traditions the world over, including indigenous and humanistic traditions, care about what’s good and true, and have sought to form people to live well. There is much that is shared in this wisdom of humankind, as well as much we can learn from each other. It is, however, a striking feature of the New Testament letters that they claim a

particular quality of virtue has become newly visible and available through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In a nutshell, here's how the understanding goes.

Jesus was one who lived his life wholly entrusted to God, lovingly responsive and perfectly obedient. In this spirit, he entered willingly into the maelstrom of human violence and was given up to death. He consciously embraced our worst, refusing to return evil for evil, thereby in some mysterious way breaking its power. By raising him from death, God vindicated Jesus and his way. His return to his disciples in forgiveness and peace made real for them the love of God. In the light of the resurrection, they come to know, beyond all doubt, that God is radically and unconditionally for humanity. God seeks our good, no matter what we do.

And this is how the first disciples came to proclaim, with astonished gratitude, that the whole point of Jesus' life, culminating in his death and resurrection, was to 'save us' from our compulsion to make ourselves matter or to justify ourselves. These are compulsions which so readily lead us into rivalry with one another, into grasping, defendedness and ultimately violence. The Christian proclamation is that we don't have to do that anymore. In and through Christ our significance, our meaning is simply given; we are held and loved eternally and cannot be lost. 'By his great mercy', says 1 Peter, 'he has given us a new birth into a living hope ... and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (1.3-4). It's the felt experience of this profound acceptance and belovedness, this liberation from compulsive striving to be good, to be approved of, to belong, that gives rise to radical new possibilities for being.

What are these? Well – look at how Jesus was – happy in his own skin, generous, undefended, forgiving, merciful, hospitable, truthful, courageous. The key insight is that the power to be this way, to exercise these virtues, is not primarily a matter of will. It's not that we now have to *try* to be like him. Rather, this way of being, this holiness, is the natural outworking in us of grace, of being loved; it's who we can expect to become as our self-entrustment deepens, as we're liberated from striving and come to 'share the mind of Christ'. This doesn't mean there's no effort

required on our part. We must still resist the lure of unreality, separation and the like. 1 Peter exhorts its readers to 'discipline yourselves' (1: 13) and to 'rid yourselves ... of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander' (2: 1). But the letter also insists there's a sense in which holiness of life is about participating in a goodness that is given rather than pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps: 'discipline yourselves', yes; *and* 'set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed' (1: 13). On this understanding, moral life shifts from a matter of primarily will-based, muscular effort to being the fruit of a certain kind of receptivity.

Theologian David Ford has written of the 'strange truth' that on the Christian understanding 'there is no direct way to goodness. We do not construct a good life by deciding to obey certain teachings, to follow our conscience, to stick to certain principles, to do our duty, to imitate good examples, or to develop virtues and good habits. There is something more fundamental than that sort of action. It is more like the "active passivity" of letting ourselves be embraced, or letting ourselves be fed the food and drink that can energize us for virtue'. This is an essentially 'contemplative' ethic, where our capacity to do what's good flows from our participation in, our transformation by the life of God.

And what this does is profoundly to affect the felt sense of Christian virtue – or 'holiness'. We discover that it involves a quality of gift and even of wonder. It's almost like goodness is happening through you, but you have a sense of it not really being 'your' possession, your achievement. Do you know this sense? Perhaps it's taken the form of finding yourself being unexpectedly and surprisingly courageous or patient. Maybe you hear yourself speaking at times boldly and directly, and wonder that it's you. Perhaps you've had an experience of hope suddenly rising up in you – against all reason and justification? Or you've discovered a new freedom to be? 1 Peter talks about 'being holy' and from the outside, this sounds full of effort and even suspect – as if it's an exhortation to be self-righteous or 'holier than thou'. But this isn't it what he's on about at all – and the difference really matters.

Our world, to put it mildly, is going through a painful disruption. At the same time, we sense the possibility of a turning point in our common life – a sudden, unexpected opportunity for some kind of global re-set of priorities, systems, solidarities. It seems therefore an appropriate moment for us to become present again to the source and shape of Christian virtue, to be open to insights we may have lost sight of, and so to strengthen our capacity to be for the world's good. This will be our concern in the next few weeks. For as the writer of 1 Peter exhorts us (and only a little bossily): 'do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves, in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy"' (1.14-16).