

## **“But I don’t want to go back.” 1 Peter 1:13-24.**

**“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

It’s been already month since we live in this new situation. Unfortunately, these new circumstances have brought to the surface the ugliness that dwells in us, and which living in effortless comfort, as we still did month ago, was more or less hidden.

Hoarding still hasn’t stopped. Fear is spreading. It seems that we have internalized the social distancing concept and have begun to look with suspicion to anyone, as to someone who can potentially make us sick and who knows what else... We’ve witnessed irrational hostility towards Asians and nurses and doctors of all people.

And I miss Formula 1, and my gym, and I am sure you all have your list of ordinary, but significant and enjoyable things that used to make your lives more colourful, but now are gone. But regardless of that, I would say that there are a few reasons why I wouldn’t want to go back to where we were.

I am quite serious about it. These reasons become obvious when we reflect on our today’s reading from 1 Peter. We will discuss three of them, and I pray that by the end of this sermon these three reasons would make sense to you too.

But before we get to the three reasons, just a few words on why Peter wrote this letter? To encourage his brothers and sisters in Christ who were suffering persecutions. Peter himself knew a thing or two about trials and sufferings.

He was tested harshly during the Holy Week. Then Jesus graciously and gently restored Peter and entrusted him to care for His flock. As Peter tried to follow His Lord, He too was persecuted, beaten, interrogated, imprisoned, exiled.

At the end of his life Peter got his second chance to fulfil the promise that he had given to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” Peter was executed, for he wouldn’t deny Jesus.

At the time when Peter wrote this letter, it is likely that the first official persecutions of Christians under the emperor Nero was well underway, and many Christians didn’t have Roman citizenship.

Which meant that they didn’t have civil rights or property right. They could be easily arrested, imprisoned, physically abused by their captors, they could be subjected to seizure of property, exiled, sent to work as slaves for government, even killed for that simple reason that they were Christians. And it happened with many.

Our problems seem insignificant comparing to theirs. In such situation Peter writes this letter, to comfort and to encourage brothers and sisters in Christ. And if that letter was good enough for them, it should be good enough for us as well.

Let’s see how Peter’s letter gives us these three reasons, why I don’t want to go back. **First**, because in trying situation **our faith is purified**. **Second**, because in trying situations **our lives are re-centred on what is truly important**. **Third**, because in trying situations **our vision is clarified** and we can see and understand this life and this world as they are.

**First, let’s reflect on how our faith is purified.** When this pandemic begun, our bishop Stephen said that he wonders what our church will look like when it is over. Perhaps, some people will leave. Perhaps disappointed with God.

Perhaps relieved that now there are good reasons to drop the whole church-thing. Perhaps, the church would gain new members. Perhaps, some of those who had been led away by the attractions and distraction of the world will return. Let’s hope...

So, how does this purification work? We could say that testing and trials may have two opposite outcomes, but they both are purifying for the body of Christ. Depending on where our true love is, trials may either drive us away from the Church or bring us closer to Jesus. How?

If someone is a member of a church, but the real reason is not their love and loyalty to Jesus, but personal gains, such testing may expose it. If what we truly love is our comfortable and prosperous life, or our careers, or family, or success of our children, and we belong to the Church so that God would give and protect what we truly love, and then suddenly these things are threatened or even lost, what happens?

It seems that God has failed us. He hasn't delivered what we were expecting. Then people may turn away. "If you don't give me what I want, why do I need you?!" It is the opposite, if we truly love God.

Then trials and challenges will bring us closer to Him and to one another. How does that happen? If we love our Father and our Lord Jesus, then we will have the mindset which trusts that for those who love God all things work together for good.

It doesn't mean that we can understand why we have these trials and challenges or that they are good. They may be terrible, like those experienced by the early Christians, or like deadly pandemics. Then why would we say that they will work together for good? Because of how the Holy Spirit works with us.

He invites us to examine ourselves and to turn to our God. If you know that you are unconditionally and fervently loved by your Father in heaven, that He is in control, and He has promised to lead you through this short life to be with Him in eternity.

If we know it, why would we fear? Why would we be anxious? What are we afraid of, what do we fear to lose? Such honest questions can help us to realize that we may have been putting our trust, our security in created things that can perish. And in times of crises, when they are perishing, we feel like our world is collapsing.

Such challenging experiences may purify our faith, exposing our false gods that had taken the place of true God, and had promised us security, and happiness and peace and all good things. And if that happens, it is for our good.

"So that [as Peter says] the tested genuineness of our faith—more precious than gold [...]—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ." If this is what happens because of this pandemic – if our faith is purified and strengthened, then praise be to the Lord for His mercy! And I don't want to lose such precious gift.

**Secondly, I wouldn't want to go back, because trying situations like this re-centre our lives.** How? As Peter explains, they refocus us on our obedience to our Father and on our ultimate hope. Obedience and hope.

We like hope, but I don't think that we like the word obedience. However, Peter uses it three times in this first chapter. People in our society want to be free to do what we want to do. The Holy Spirit doesn't call it freedom. He calls it "to be conformed to the passions of our former ignorance... the futile ways."

That is not true freedom. True freedom comes as obedience. The obedience that Peter speaks about is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. When He changes our hearts to be in full harmony with our Father's holy desires for us.

The Holy Spirit makes us joyfully obedient to the Father and gently ushers us into our new lives. Only our sinful and foolish nature, that doesn't know the loving heart of our Heavenly Father and His hopes for us, can rebel against this obedience.

For He desires nothing else, but to rescue us from what hurts us and robs us. Our Father wants to make us holy and wise and glorious. He wants to purify and polish us so that we could rejoice and find pleasure in what is good and true and beautiful.

He wants to make us like His Son Jesus. This is what this obedience is about. The work of the Holy Spirit who works tirelessly to centre our lives on this obedience that will make us more like Jesus. And who wouldn't want to be more like Jesus?!

And this obedience, as Peter writes, nourishes our Christian love and care for one another. Especially when we are faced with challenges and hardships. The Spirit of God moves us to love and care for others. This is exactly what we have experienced among us during these last few weeks. And I don't want to lose it.

Another thing that trials helps us to refocus on is true hope. Our ultimate hope. Trials and sufferings are quick to destroy false hopes. So, where are our hopes placed? What do we hope will bring us security, and peace and happiness, and significance?

Unfortunately, often our hope is in created things, or as Peter puts it, in perishable things. Those may be good things, but they all can and will perish. Trials and challenges invite us to put our hope into the imperishable.

To centre our lives on what can't be taken away, on what cannot be lost, on what will never fail you. Even the best governments can fail us, but our God will never fail; we are guarded by His power, and He will bring us to Himself.

Even our family and the closest friends can let us down, but Jesus will never ever abandon us and you will see Him as He is. Property can be lost, but the inheritance in the Father's Kingdom is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept there for you.

Things that make feel us safe and create an illusion of control, can be gone in the blink of an eye, but the eternal security that we have in the hands of our Father is unshakable. Our significance can disappear together with our career, or office or with age, but our significance in Jesus' eyes will never go down.

Remember, "you were ransomed [...] not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ." We can never be certain about anything in this world, but there is nothing more certain that God's promise to bring us into His eternal Kingdom, through our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

And if this pandemic helps us to recentre our hope on the imperishable and gives us more inner peace and joy, then praise be to our Lord! I don't want to lose it.

**Finally**, the last reason why I don't want to go back. **For trials sharpen our sight.** They help us to see things as they are. As Peter put it, they prepare our minds for action and help us to be sober minded.

Our God wants us to use our reason, He sends His Spirit to renew our minds, so that we can see the big picture as clearly as possible. To know who we are, who He is and where we are heading. The Holy Spirit reveals to us God's perspective.

For if we begin to see the world through the resurrection of Jesus, as we discussed it the last week, it is a beautiful picture. As Peter mentions it repeatedly, then we know that we are at the very heart of God's eternal plan.

Even before the creation of the world He foreknew what He was going to do. Jesus' life and death and resurrection were God's plan for you. What is happening now, with all the uncertainty may feel confusing for us.

But nothing can ruin our Father's plans, whatever scary it may seem from our human perspective. Nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus. And nothing and no one can snatch you out of His gentle, but almighty hands.

How can we be sure about that? Because, as Peter put it, these Good News are proclaimed to you by the Holy Spirit Himself from heaven. Even angels long to look into it. And because these are God's promises – they will remain forever.

When I reflect on all of this, I don't want to go back. Sure, I look forward to enjoying our fellowships and times together again. To celebrate the Holy Communion. To have our lunches and so on. Also, Formula 1, my gym and other things...

But I don't want to give up the faith that is purified. I don't want to lose the focus on our ultimate hope and our obedience to Jesus. I don't want to lose clearer vision on the world. What about you?

Instead I pray and invite you to join, that our Lord would use this time to purify the body of Christ, that we all and many of our loved one could re-centre our lives on Jesus and on the things imperishable, and that we all would have our vision clarified by the Holy Spirit so that we could, as Peter puts it, all together "rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtain the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls."

Amen.