

# 1 Peter | A holy nation

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*Alison Sampson, reflecting on 1 Peter 2:1-10*

‘You are a chosen race,’ writes Peter, ‘a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.’ ‘Ura!’ shouts Vlad as he orders yet another series of bombings and sends yet another bunch of Russian boys to their deaths in his drive to extend the Holy Russian Empire. ‘Yes!’ screams the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda as it abducts yet more children to be soldiers and sex slaves, victims of a horrific campaign to establish a Christian nation governed by the Ten Commandments. ‘Yes sirree!’ crows Pete as he wages an illegal and despicable war against Iran in the name of the God of the Crusades.

‘God, yeah!’ shouted Trump supporters when they stormed the Capitol in January 2021. They brandished Bibles, carried wooden crosses, and held up signs declaring ‘Jesus Saves.’ As they threatened senate staff and beat a security guard to death, they sang praise and worship songs then kneeled down in prayer. For they were purifying their nation, ensuring it was holy by eliminating all the so-called enemies within.

Closer to home, ‘Amen!’ pray the Christians who insist that the colonisation of this continent and the murder and dispossession of her peoples was a salvific act. ‘Damn straight,’ don’t quite say the Christians who demonise gay folk, picket trans story time, block gender affirming care and seek to suppress women’s rights. ‘Aussie, Aussie, Aussie,’ shout the flag-wavers who insist we’re a Christian nation while rejecting anyone who isn’t white.

When I hear Christians equating ‘a holy nation’ with a political entity, my skin crawls. For when people conflate membership of the body of Christ with national citizenship, we invariably see outcomes which betray the gospel: the oppression of women, the persecution of queer folk, the hatred of foreigners. We see the worship of national institutions and symbols. The idolisation of the state’s authority. The veneration of violence.

So what do we do with Peter’s words that we are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’? Do we throw them out? Or

could they be good news, if not in the way some Christians seem to think? I believe so, which is why I'm standing here. So let's take a closer look.

In his letter, the Apostle Peter is writing 'to the exiles of the dispersion' (1:1). That is, he is writing to disciples who had been scattered to the winds by violent fundamentalists. As the number of Jesus followers grew, some religious authorities became nervous. They had organized the crucifixion of Jesus, yet even after his death, his movement continued to grow. So they began to persecute and even kill his followers.

Apostles were flogged; Stephen was stoned; and a man named Saul 'was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women and committing them to jail.' (Acts 8:3). Indeed, he was 'breathing threats and murder' (9:1) as he travelled to Damascus to track down more Jesus-followers and extradite them to Jerusalem. Which is all to say, the recipients of Peter's letter were a small, scattered, persecuted bunch. They'd been driven out of the religious community and even out of the region; they bore the brunt of a vicious religious fundamentalism.

And why? Because they placed their faith in Jesus, who taught that God's grace isn't exclusive and that love is more important than the law. This is what enraged the fundamentalists. You might remember the time a mob tried to drive Jesus off a cliff: it was when he reminded them that God's generosity and healing had been shared with foreigners (Luke 4:24ff). You might also remember some of the complaints made about him: that he ate with religious outsiders; that he healed on the sabbath; and that over and above law and judgement he offered love and mercy. So the religiously powerful had him killed. Then, as his movement grew anyway, they persecuted, arrested, murdered, or drove away many of his followers; and the recipients of Peter's letter are these exiles.

Peter's words are not addressed to the powerful, but to the victims of religious purification efforts. In our context, they might be addressed to a gay Ugandan Christian fleeing for her life; or an American being threatened for proclaiming a gospel of hospitality and nonviolence; or a trans kid kicked out of home by his 'good Christian family'. They might be addressed to a lesbian couple refused communion and excommunicated from their church, or a family told to keep their disabled kid home from worship. They might be addressed to a woman who has fled a violent marriage and a patriarchal

church, or a divorcee who is barred from church leadership and subsequently shunned.

They might also be addressed to a quaker or questioner who follows Jesus but needs space for doubt, but is told that a faithful person never questions and to come back when they have faith. Indeed, this letter is addressed to anyone who has fled home, church, community or country because of a suffocating religiosity; it's addressed to anyone who has escaped religious rejection and even violence yet has somehow retained a shred of faith.

To such people, Peter writes, 'Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all trickery, insincerity, envy, and all slander.' Let go of the viciousness which has been heaped upon you, and do not take it on. Don't let your persecution define you and, whatever you do, don't mirror it; don't become malicious yourself.

You have been fed toxic waste, but instead, 'like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk which will help you grow into maturity and wholeness in God.' Drink deep, suck hard, generate more milk from the infinitely giving maternally-imaged godly breast. As you grow stronger, seek good bread, living water, new wine, and the life which flows from Christ. Find the stories of love, hope and healing; eat with others; follow the trail of breadcrumbs which leads from the table to a wide and spacious place.

Peter writes, 'though rejected by mortals, come to him, a living stone, chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones allow yourselves to be built into a sanctuary vibrant with life, a holy priesthood offering your Christ-shaped lives up to God.' In other words, join with others, because you cannot go it alone. Find a place of belonging, and allow God to form you into a vibrant spiritual home.

Offer spiritual sacrifices, that is, loving, self-giving Christ-shaped lives. Because this isn't the way of domination and death. It's not the way of white supremacy and Christian nationalism. It's not the way of an aggressive heteronormativity or hatred; it's not the way of rigid religious boundaries. Instead, it's the Way of Jesus, the Way which heaps blessings on the poor, the grounded, the merciful, and the persecuted, and meets evil and abuse with love. It's the Way which shatters every human boundary and showers religious outsiders with grace. It's the Way which offers dignity and belonging, healing and hope, to those used by the religious right as punching

bags. And as we see in the news every day, it's the Way which is so often despised and rejected by fundamentalists.

As people united by this Way, allow 'the stone the builders rejected,' that is, Christ, to shape your common life. Let your gatherings be characterized by mercy, by gentleness, by hospitality, by love, and by a priority for the most vulnerable. Your words, attitudes and actions will reveal your true foundation: let it be Christ. For when Christ is your shared foundation, you indeed become 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.'

And while all these titles sound mighty fine, by now you will have noticed that they don't confer any power, privilege or entitlement. Instead, they are built on the one who emptied himself of power and gave his life away. More, they have a purpose. And by now you will have also noticed that this purpose is not to persecute trans folk, lay claim to new territories, or enforce a violent patriarchal Christian state. Instead, it's to build solidarity with rejected, hurting, suffering people and to proclaim God's goodness to all.

As Peter writes elsewhere in his letter, and recently referred to by the Pope, we must 'turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it, for God's eyes are on the just, and God's ears are open to their prayer, but God's face is against those who do evil.' (3:11-12). As God's own people, we are to work for the peace which is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a goodness which brings diverse people together to build a world where all can thrive.

My friends, we live in dark days. Powerful people use Christianish words to tear the world apart. It is deeply troubling, even overwhelming at times. Yet every act of kindness, gentleness, mercy and self-giving is an act of resistance which creates a pool of light. And we here at MUC are good at kindness, we are good at gentleness, we are good at caring for others. So with Peter's encouragement ringing in our ears, let us keep doing these things.

And as members of a holy nation which transcends human boundaries, a nation which brings people together and seeks only their flourishing, a nation overflowing with love, let us savour and share God's goodness. Through word and deed let us declare the praises of the One who called us out of the darkness and into the most marvellous light. God's kingdom come, God's will be done, God's love be shown, here and now and everywhere on earth. Amen. Ω