

When the Worship Ends, the Service Begins

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[0 : 00] 1 Peter 4 and verse 8 we read these words, Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Each one should use whatever gift he or she has received to serve others. Maybe, like me, you like those movies that are slightly kind of scary only because they're movies about a potential threat to the future of our whole civilization, of human life as we know it here on Earth.

I'm thinking of movies like Greenland and Contagion. I guess Contagion is a fairly contemporary theme at the moment. And I think the appeal of such movies is that actually it's not quite beyond our imagination to imagine that any of these scenarios might happen.

We know, for instance, that millions of years ago, a meteorite hit the Earth and apparently wiped out the dinosaurs, God love them.

And we know that the threat of global pandemic is a threat that's only too close to us, but hanging over us like a sort of sword of Damocles is the threat of global warming caused by man-made climate change.

[1 : 35] And depending on which scientists you read, you will discover that the Earth's got 30 years left in it as we carry on as we do, or maybe longer if other models have got it right.

I love that quote that somebody said in relation to climate change. They said, there is no plan B because there is no planet B. And we know what the person who said that meant.

And Peter is seeking in his letter to encourage Christians who are going through tough times. And many of you feel that you're going through tough times.

Not quite the same as the Christians that Peter was writing to. Peter was dealing with Christians who were being persecuted simply for owning the name of Jesus Christ.

And we can read in chapter 1 and verse 6 of his amazing epistle these words. In this, Peter writes to the Christians, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

[2 : 54] It's interesting that in the early church, because they thought that the return of Jesus was so imminent, they were truly perplexed when any of the early Christians died.

They couldn't work it out. Why? What's going on here? In 2,000 years on, we're less clear whether there will be a time, as the early church thought, there will be a time when God will bring to a close the whole of human history.

And those who are dead and those who are alive will be judged by God. In AD 325, the Council of Nicaea wrote the Nicene Creed, accepted it in the church as a kind of definitive statement of what we Christians believe.

And a very important part of that goes like this. We say together, he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Or the quick and the dead, to use the old language. I've never forgotten this. When I was made Archdeacon of Berkshire just after the Reformation, I went to visit with the Archdeacon who was retiring, funny old, I can't remember his name now, David something.

[4 : 16] He said to me, Michael, he said, the clergy are of two sorts. He said, the quick and the dead. Well, I've never forgotten that. He will come again.

And so, what we discover is that Peter here, particularly in the passage that we're dealing with, is trying to teach Christians how they should live in the light of what Peter thought was the imminent return of Jesus and the end of human history.

Giving them advice on how they should live in that context. And you say to yourself, hang on. Two thousand years of history has gone by.

You know, why is this relevant to us? Well, it's relevant to us because the New Testament is very clear in this. That because we don't know when Christ will return, we should live as if it might be imminent.

It's quite a challenging thought. I get that. But we should live responsibly today with the end in mind. [5 : 29] And Peter is very clear in his advice about that. We'll come on to that in just a second. Some years ago, the accident investigation people in the USA did a huge research study around horrible incidents that happened.

Things like plane crashes, things like car accidents, you know, bridges, collapse, whatever. And what they were trying to find out is in such situations, who is helpful and who isn't?

And this is what they discovered. I would never have guessed this, counterintuitive to me, but in a panic, calamitous situation, 10% of people keep their wits about them and act responsibly and do things that are broadly judged in terms of the research as helpful.

80% of people, 80%, 8 out of 10, do nothing but panic. And 10% actively getting involved in doing things that are distinctly unhelpful.

You might have to think to yourself, who am I? And don't put your hands up, but who am I in that context? How am I when, you know, all around me is falling apart?

[7 : 01] And you might like to ask yourself the question, just suppose, go to the theme of that movie, Greenland, suppose it was announced in the newspaper and on the media tomorrow that there was a massive meteorite heading for Earth and our days were numbered and they could calculate how long it would take for that meteorite to hit planet Earth.

And do you see that suddenly you're being told you've got three months left on planet Earth before a catastrophic event sees to the end of all of us.

Well, that's the scenario that another group of researchers put to people and they discovered that people said things like this. I mean, who would do this, right? A lot of people said we would max out our credit cards in the time left to us.

Some of you are thinking I'm already maxed out, you know, how's that, how's that help me? Some people said that they would enter as many casual sexual relationships as they could in the time left to them.

And very few people said anything responsible in relation to that research.

[8 : 22] Majority of people said, well, what can you do? You know, just sit around and wait for it to happen. Well, that's not what Peter thinks. And you might ask yourself the question, Mike, you said that Peter was writing to encourage us and then he's telling us the world is going to end any time.

How does that work? Well, it works like this because Peter was keen to try and speak reality as he understood it to a fledgling church in different parts of the diaspora around the ancient Near East. So what is his advice? Well, the first thing we read is this, therefore be clear-minded, verse 7, and self-controlled so that you can pray.

I know that there are some people who say are Christians, they're so heavenly-minded, they're not of much earthly use. But actually, one of the things about calamitous scenarios is the tendency to panic inherently, basically drives many of us to be very self-centered, to become confused in our thinking.

I think we've seen that through the pandemic to a certain extent. People's thinking just seems a bit wrong-headed. No, says Peter, in the light of the Lord's return, be clear-minded, be clear-headed, no, don't be wrong-headed.

[9 : 59] God knows there are enough wrong-headed ideas alive in our culture right now, we just prayed for some of them. Be clear-headed, take a few deep breaths, don't panic, and pray to Almighty God.

See, Peter didn't think that the end was the end for everyone. He subscribed to this idea developing in the church at the time that there would be a time when God would draw down the curtain on the whole of human history and that he would send his son back to planet Earth to judge the living and the dead.

But he also thought that there was a way to avoid adverse judgment. And that was to trust Christ and his finished work on the cross of Calvary.

I don't know if there are other ways to be saved. I'm not that smart, I don't know, but what I do know is that this book says, the Bible, that there is only one way to be saved and that's in Jesus Christ.

He's saying to himself, well, you know, I'll bide my time, you know, maybe, you know, if things start to hot up a bit, if Ukraine kicks off and, you know, things start to go wrong, you know, maybe I'll reconsider that decision.

[11 : 39] Now, Peter, Peter's very keen writing to Christians that they should behave in a right way, but Peter also believed that the end of all things would not be the end for some, that for those who trust Christ, death, finality, calamity, would not be the end, but would be a new beginning.

People who panic don't think clearly and switch into self-survival mode. But Peter was a pragmatist as well.

He wasn't just saying, you know, hang around praying till the end. He said, no, first, our text, offer hospitality, to one another.

Verse, sorry, verse 8, above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins. Now, let's be clear, what Peter isn't saying here is that the end of the world is nigh, so invite your neighbour in for a cup of coffee.

The word hospitality is an interesting word. It's a Greek word, philozenia. It's made up of two roots. One is philia, which means to love, and the other is xenos, which is the root of our word xenophobia.

[13 : 20] So what hospitality in the Bible means is it's a position of the heart and mind, and it literally means love the stranger, love the foreigner.

show hospitality. Of course, that includes coffee and, you know, inviting your friends for coffee and doing, but it's something much deeper than that, something much bigger than that.

Paul's saying, as, sorry, Peter's saying, as the end approaches, love the stranger and love the foreigner, love the people who are not like you, love the people who, the very thought of them makes you feel just a little bit uncomfortable.

And Peter had a fascinating take on the relationship between the way Christians behave and the way pagans behave.

Chapter 2 and verse 12, he says this, live such, he's writing to the church, you and me, 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.

[14 : 46] You get that, right? No rocket science. It is that the way we behave will have an impact on the way people who are unbelievers see us and see the value of our faith or not.

Peter's a practical person. Love one another and offer hospitality, vilosenia, to each other. I wonder if the people who were lying in bed this morning with the Sunday papers in front of them are thinking of church primarily as a place of hospitality.

And in Swindon the Sikhs built this amazing Gurdvara. It's a Sikh temple, it's like, you know, their church. And one thing I learned was that literally 24 hours a day if you show up at the Gurdvara, there is hospitality on offer.

Samots and Pakura just, you know, when I worked in Slough, I put on weight. And of course there's an element of hospitality which is cultural, isn't it?

You know, some cultures in some places people are highly offended if you don't accept their hospitality. You know, when you sit with a Bedouin around a pot of tea and, you know, the great honour is to be given the sheep's eye to eat.

[16 : 31] And you breathe before and if you don't eat it that will be a huge insult. What do you do? What do you do? You can feign vegetarianism or something like that.

But, you know, it's just such a big deal, you know, that in households people had food prepared in case somebody knocked on the door.

I like that and I think our churches should be nearer to that. I also think that you know, the quality of our hospitality is really important.

And, Clive, I'm not obsessed by coffee, so don't worry about it. But I think to myself, you know, if somebody has had a peripatetic ministry, you know, been around churches, different churches every Sunday, my custodied conclusion is that the difference in effort between making a nice cup of coffee and church coffee is minimal effort.

And I mean, I'm talking about, you know, the sweet old ladies in these rural churches who bought a pot of powdered co-op coffee and you don't put enough in the cup anyway.

[17 : 54] And, you know, I think to myself, let's not shortcut this. Let's be lavish in our hospitality so that the world might believe.

You might just note on pass on that when you, when they talk to people who have done the alpha course, one of the things on the, people on the alpha course said, one of the things, not the main thing, but one of the things people said that doing alpha around a shared meal was really important for them.

So we need to show generous hospitality, inclusive hospitality. Come back to that. And it needs to be ongoing.

You know, we can't have a church's week of hospitality. It needs to be 52 weeks of the year. And then Peter says something really interesting. Without grumbling of our hospitality, throughout the whole history of the Bible, the people of God had a wonderful reputation for what the Old Testament called muttering.

And you know that kind of functions around churches, don't you? There's always muttering. And you know, I like to say, and I've stayed clean of it all my life, I have never indulged in muttering.

[19 : 26] Wrong. I have been an instigator around muttering on occasions. I am a weapon grade mutterer. That's got to stop.

And then Peter says serve one another, verse 10. And then we've been thinking about gifts over the last few weeks. What Peter's saying here is, in relation to the way we are with one another, that we should use those gifts, spiritual gifts that God has given us to serve one another.

It's like Paul's picture of the church, that when everybody functions in their gift area and we offer those gifts together, the church becomes something different. It becomes something way beyond the potential that we can at the present imagine.

I said to my home group that God gives us spiritual gifts to glorify himself, to edify the church and to serve in the world.

The way we behave as a church might be the kicker, the clincher in the way others believe or don't believe.

[20 : 44] So here are three things that I'd like you to take home today. Think about it. I can't make you do anything. You realise that, obviously.

There are three things that you could do. One, do something hospitable this week. Maybe think about somebody who you don't feel particularly comfortable about and bake them a cake or write them a note.

or invite them into your home. Two, pray about getting involved in a ministry that involves somebody who is different than you.

Now some people have got very involved in ministry with asylum seekers. Some of you will hold some quite hostile views towards asylum seekers. get involved even if it meant just sending some money.

And Sunday Times this morning, there's a shocking picture on the front page of a little girl sitting with her mother covered in snow, freezing to death, begging for food.

[22 : 05] Surely some of us could send out a bit of money, you know, don't forget the church, I get that. Some of us could send a bit of money to help out there. Bearing in mind that part of that situation was caused by that hazardous and chaotic withdrawal of Americans and British service staff.

And the third thing you could do is this. Talk to somebody who loves you enough to tell you the truth about your spiritual gifts.

gifts. We've got friends who just say what they think we want to hear. Friends like that are, you know, useful in a way, but talk to somebody who loves you enough to be able to tell you the truth. So that, you know, the tragedy of churches is that a huge percentage of members haven't got a clue what their spiritual gifting is. So they can't offer it to serve others.

I mean, it makes a pretty redundant church when that happens. Let me close with a story. This is a true story and I'm going to abbreviate it because time is running on and you're starting to look comatose.

[23 : 29] One night, one night, I'm home and Anthony and the kids had gone away to, I think it was to her mother's. And it was a dark and windy night and our rectory was in the middle of trees and slightly apart from any other properties.

And I just watched the American football and Chicago Bears had won. You can tell this was years ago. It's midnight. Going to bed suddenly, there's a knock on the door.

Part of me, I mean, what does this say about me? Part of me thought, I'm just going to go to bed and pretend I didn't hear it. Then I realised I would have to pass the front door with windows in it to get to my bed.

I thought again about it. So I opened the door. There's a guy there about 19 years old. First thing I noticed was he got love and hate tattooed on his knuckles, which is not always, but mostly a sign that this person's been in prison.

I said, can I help you? He said, I need a bed for the night. Immediately, my mind went into overdrive, trying to think of at least 36 reasons why I couldn't possibly let this person across my doorway.

[24 : 53] I don't know if it's the Holy Spirit or it was just my general state of panic, which is usually not great. I couldn't think of anything. Oh, auntie and the kids were away, why not? I took him in, put him up on the sofa downstairs.

I went to bed wondering whether I would get up and still possess a television and a video. Next morning I got up, he's still there. We had breakfast together and I said a little bit about my story, told me his story, he was working for a family of crooks in Aylesbury and he said, he kind of summarised our conversation beautifully.

He said, I guess the difference between you and me, Mike, is you've got Jesus and I don't. I'll settle for that, I'll take that. He went out of my life.

Fifteen years later I stood up to speak in the International Conference Centre in Cardiff, Wales. and from the back of the auditorium suddenly this voice shouts, Mikey!

And there's this clop, clop, clop, clop, clop, clop, comes down the stairs, down the stairs, gets up on the stage. I'm standing there thinking, who the heck is this? And comes up to me, puts his arms around me and kisses me on the cheek.

[26 : 21] My first thought was, that's the end of my ministry. I can go and get a proper job now. That's what he said. He said, this guy doesn't know him.

He said, when I saw him, I was in a terrible state. I'd beaten my girlfriend up and her parents had thrown me out of the house and I needed a bed for the night. And he was stupid enough to let me have a bed.

I'm telling you the story against myself because everything in me wanted to get rid of this guy. Do you know what? I even thought about taking the poker to bed just in case it kicked off.

I didn't. And then he said, what he doesn't know is, I became a Christian and I'm now a pastor of a Pentecostal church.

And I run a company that makes movies. We should make the kind of movies you'd be happy for your children to look at. It started the day this guy opened his door.

[27 : 38] Listen to me. You need to be careful about who you let in your house. I mean, seriously, I would say that. I think it's probably a tad reckless. But look, when you offer that philosenia, that kind of love to the people who are not like you, who you feel uncomfortable with, my goodness, you can open the door to a lot of good things.

And who knows? Maybe when that day that Peter anticipated was going to happen sooner rather than later, when the end of things happened. Who knows? Because of the way you behave, another soul might be saved.

Let's pray together. Lord, oh my gosh, we're such complicated people.

With our likes and our dislikes, with our sense of comfort, with the people who are like us, and our distrust and uncomfortableness with people who are not like us.

And yet, Lord, you call us to love the other deeply. And Lord, the truth is we can't do that in our own strength. We need help from you.

[29 : 13] Lord, all you're looking at is for someone to say yes. Yes, Lord, I get it.

And I don't just want to hold that thought in my head. I want to go and do something. Even this week, bake a cake, write a note, go visit. So Lord, help us this week to value the principle of hospitality deep in our minds and in our hearts.

And help us to go and do something to glorify your name. The pagans might have a change of heart. heart. And we pray these things in the name of Jesus.

And the people who agreed said together loudly. Amen. Let's go.