Exiles? (our last morning service in the St Vincent Street Building)

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Well, on July the 17th, 1957, Hope Street, Gallic Chapel, Free Church of Scotland, burned to the ground. From that day on, 17th July 1957, our congregation has been homeless.

For a few years we met in this place and then in that place, until in 1971 we began meeting in the Greek Thompson building here on St Vincent Street. Joined by Milton Free Church in 2000, our congregation has been homeless, really, since 1957. We've been transients in houses not our own, sometimes for a matter of weeks, sometimes for half a century. We are people without a home. Travellers who are making ready for another move.
Now for most of us, this building is all you have ever known. Some of you might remember our year in Anderson Primary School. But apart from that, when you think of Glasgow City Free Church, you're thinking of the Greek Thompson Church here with its ornate pillars and its awe-inspiring architecture and tower. Now even though I hope we've all learned, especially through lockdown, that Glasgow City Free Church is a family we belong to, not a building we come to, it's quite natural that we look forward with great apprehension to leaving behind this building which has served us as our temporary home for 50 years.
We don't want to be exiles, transients and travellers. It unsettles us. It leaves us feeling, well, uncertain.
But you know, the Bible is filled with transients and exiles and travellers. During his earthly ministry, Jesus fell into this category. It was said of him, foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.
[2:16] In fact, all the great figures in the Bible were travellers, exiles, transients, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, Peter, Paul. Now their exiles were more dramatic than ours and yet we still feel our transients. We still feel like we're not. We still feel like we're not.

Albeit they moved countries and sometimes continents and we're only moving three miles along the city. But none of us like being homeless. And in our darker moments, perhaps we ask ourselves the question, is this the end for Glasgow City Free Church?
After nearly 200 years of life and witness in Glasgow City Centre, is this our last move? Well, for many years, 1 Peter 1 and 2 has both fascinated and challenged me.
He's writing to exiles, just like us, forced to be displaced from their homeland, travellers, refugees, transients. And he writes with all the authority of an apostle, speaking the very words of Christ to his troubled people.
Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. And he addresses the elect exiles of the Diaspora, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedient to Jesus Christ, for sprinkling with his blood.
[4:02] These first Christians, rendered homeless because of their counter-cultural faith in Jesus Christ, they're not really, you know, so different from us. Their experience was not the reality.

Though they might be exiles, God's got a bigger plan for them. And today, in this last Sunday morning worship service, in the St. Vincent Street building, there's another worship service, that's this evening at half past six, but this last Sunday morning worship service in St. Vincent Street building, we face another temporary move.
But we want to listen again to Christ's voice, as through the apostle Peter, he reassures us that though exile and transience may be our experience, it's not our reality.
The reality is the permanence of relationship with God the Father, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, just as it has been since the very beginning of Hope Street Galat Chapel in

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1824.
Well, I want us briefly this morning to consider Peter's address in two ways. First, the experience of transience, and then the reality of permanence.
[5:25] And my aim really is to settle us all down, to give us hope for the future. First of all, the experience of transience.

Transience. Now you will know the first 30 years of the early Christian church's life was somewhat eventful. At points, the church enjoyed the favor of the society around it.
At other points, Christians were persecuted for their faith in the Lord. It happened in Jerusalem, when under the persecution of Herod, Stephen became the first Christian martyr.
And many Christians were scattered over the whole Roman Empire. A few years later, it happened again, when Christians were blamed for various rebellions.
Again, they were scattered over the whole world. And Peter's writing to one such group of Christians who've been scattered because of their faith. All these areas, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, are in today's Turkey.
[6:27] But at that time, there were separate Roman provinces. Christians from Judea had been forced out by persecution and they had settled in these areas and wherever they went, they set up Christian churches.

Perhaps they'd taken time to reach these places. Perhaps some of them had stopped for a while in Antioch and then in Tarsus before making their way northward and westward.
But if you'd asked them the question, all these Christians, where's home for you? They'd have said, not here, back in Jerusalem.
Now, Peter uses a very particular version of the word exiles, one which is specifically designed to point to their impermanence, to their transience.
transience. These are people who don't belong where they are. They are travelers, to use an old-fashioned word, sojourners. They lived in houses not their own, built by another.
[7:32] They weren't at home and they knew it. And as such, they faced their own experiences of living as Christians in exile. As you read through 1 Peter, I wonder whether the most powerful of these emotions was that of despair.

They may have felt the oppressive reality of displacement, that there's no future for them anywhere. That's why Peter begins the letter with one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible.
Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.
From the get-go, Peter's offering them hope through Christ's resurrection simply because at the present time, due to their status as exiles, they're experiencing anxiety, uncertainty, uncertainty, despair.
And perhaps that's the way it is for some of you this morning. This building has been your home, some of you for your entire life. On a Sunday summer evening, when the sun is streaming through those west windows that are upstairs, the pews in the church assume a golden sheen and it is stunningly beautiful.
[9:05] Stephen and Hannah, these lights here, they met each other in this place. Perhaps you met your life partner in this building. You were married here. Your children were baptized here.

Funerals for your loved ones have taken place here. You have laughed in this place. You have argued in this place. You have cried in this place. You have grown in this place.
This building's been your home for all these years. I get it. Leaving here fills us all with apprehension and despair. Just like my own son Jonathan was baptized in this place.
And we ask ourselves the question, is this the end for us as Glasgow City Free Church? The word Peter uses translated as exiles emphasizing the transience, the impermanence of these early Christians is only used very sparingly in the New Testament.
And one of the places it's used is in Hebrews 11 verse 13. Hebrews 11 verse 13. That verse is speaking about Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah.
[10:18] And it says of them, these all died in faith, having not received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

And here we are this morning, a spiritual descendant of these great Old Testament heroes who cling by faith to the promises of God and we're the same as them.

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We're exiles. Abraham lived as a transient in the land of Canaan. Jacob, for a time, lived as a refugee in the land of Egypt.
If we are their spiritual descendants by faith in Jesus Christ, then exile, exiles we must be. Our home is not here for us, we read later on in Hebrews, we're longing for a better country, a heavenly country.
Abraham often struggled with his neighbors. There were arguments over land rights and who had the right to this well or that well. The same was true for Isaac. The same was true for Jacob.
[11:34] It cost Abel his life. Noah's home was destroyed and for many weeks his temporary refuge was a huge wooden boat. Each of these places was exile for them.

There were transients and travelers all the way through life and they didn't get it home until they got home to God in heaven. So you know, we come from a long line of faithful exiles who know exactly what it feels like to live as exiles.
It may not be pleasant. Perhaps we'd prefer to have a permanent home. Not that we've had one really since 1957. But then neither did any of those great biblical figures of the faith in the past.
And far from doing them no harm, it focused their minds on the truth. Here we have no continuing city. And so again, I say as I look at these lights and remember that wonderful Kayleigh we had here when Stephen and Hannah got married.
The experience of transients may not be pleasant for any of us but it's a family tradition. It draws our focus away from the temporary and the worthless, however amazing this place must be.
[12:55] And draws us to the permanence and value of our relationship with Christ and our gospel hope in Him. The early church was radical. It was missional.

It was fruitful. Could part of that be the contribution of their transients? Our greatest need as Glasgow City Free Church isn't a permanent home.
Listen carefully to what I say. Our greatest need is not a permanent home in Glasgow but a passionate desire for Glasgow. passionate desire for Glasgow.
And then secondly we've looked at the experience of transients then secondly the reality of permanence. The reality of permanence. So we've established yes there is such a thing as the experience of transients.
This is not our home in fact as long as we live here on earth we're never going to feel fully at home. We walk in the footsteps of a long line our Lord his faithful followers who knew that they were strangers and exiles on this earth.
[14:07] And yet the reality of our permanence will always be greater than the experience of our transients. In verse 2 Peter wants us to know that however anxious and unsettled you might feel today God is bigger than you can ever know or imagine and his love for you is eternal infinite and unchangeable in its passion inventiveness and intensity.

In what is really a brilliant Trinitarian formula Peter speaks of Father and Son and Holy Spirit one God and of that God Peter says four things very briefly.
First of all plan plan God has a plan. I want to suggest that Peter is being deliberately ambiguous in his use of the words according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.
According to the foreknowledge of God the Father. This foreknowledge could refer to our election as Christians our predestination we are elect exiles but it could also refer to our exile as Christians we are elect exiles but our exile our transience our homelessness that is the plan of God for us.
The foreknowledge of God isn't something that he merely knows will happen before it does. The foreknowledge is something God plans to happen before it does.
[15:45] It was their heavenly fathers planned for them that these first Christians should be displaced from Jerusalem and be dispersed into modern Turkey.

They were not victims of random events victims of happenstance as it were. It was their loving heavenly fathers intention that they should be thrust out of their comfort zones and into situations in which they were less familiar so that they might learn to rely less on the temporary and worthless things of this world and rely more upon the hope and grace of Christ in the gospel.
I think you'll need to see the damage upstairs to see it is our heavenly fathers sovereign plan for us that we should be displaced from this building and dispersed elsewhere.
We are not victims of random events. Our God is on the throne. He has a better plan for us. This is not the end for us.

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God's got a better plan for us. He's not given up on us. He has put us in a situation where we've got to learn to rely less upon the temporary and worthless things of this world and more upon the grace and hope of Christ in the gospel.
[17:10] second thing purity. Why is God doing this to us? Purity. Again Peter is being deliberately ambiguous in his use of in the sanctification of the spirit.

Could that be a reference to these first Christians being elect or being exiles? To their election or their exile? Both may be in view but today we're viewing it as the latter.
God's plan for us in this exile is that we be sanctified in the spirit. Now you will know that the word sanctification means to become holy.
For holiness means two things. To be separate and to be pure. The Father's goal for these early Christians is that the Holy Spirit would use their exile to make them more holy.
To separate them further from the world in which they live. to make them realize just how transitory and temporary their life in this world is. And in so doing to consecrate and dedicate them to God.
[18:21] our holiness consists in this. Our purity and consecration to God are putting Christ first in all things.

Yes, in our family and in our work, in our relationships, both casual relationships and deep relationships, our dreams, our ambitions, our careers, our commitments. transience. It's as if the Holy Spirit uses our experience of exile and transience to cut the ropes which bind us to this world. This present age begins to lose its luster and beauty in the light of the glory and grace of Jesus. And so God used the exile of these first Christians from Jerusalem to make them holy unto him. God will use our transience the same way. We call this move holiness unto the Lord and we mark it in our hearts as such.
Well, third, pattern, pattern, plan, purity, pattern. In its primary sense, for obedience to Jesus Christ is the goal of our election.
[19:39] but we should be conformed to the pattern of love and righteousness we see in the life of Jesus Christ. If today you're living in disobedience to Christ in an unrighteous and loving way, you are defying the purpose for which your Father has called you.

But in its secondary sense, as used here by Peter, the Father's plan in our exile is that we grow in our obedience to Jesus Christ.
But the very experience of listening to his call to go represents obedience. Abraham heard God's call to go and he obeyed.
Jesus heard his Father's call to go and he obeyed. Paul heard Christ's voice to go and he obeyed. obedience isn't a word we hear too much of in today's evangelical language.
That is to our significant loss. We see it as being associated too much with slavish duty rather than seeing it for what it is. Living in loving relationship with our heavenly Father according to the pattern of Jesus Christ.
[20:57] Christ. Or if we want to put it another way, becoming more like Jesus whose life was obedience from beginning to end.

It's not the mere act of moving which renders us obedient. It is that once again we are being driven away from conforming to the patterns of the world around us and rather latched on to the pattern of faith demonstrated by our forefathers.
Think of our forefathers for a moment. Think of the covenanters. Men and women who were dispossessed of homes and lands and churches for no other reason than they called Christ a greater king than any steward.
They worshipped on cold and barren moors to the south of here. They were homeless and persecuted. They were shot and they were hanged. But through it all they became more like Jesus their master.
Now no one's going to shoot us for temporarily moving to partake. Well I hope not anyway. But if it makes us more like Jesus, if it deepens our obedience to Jesus, then all these experiences of anxiety and stress and unsettlement are worth it.
[22:14] A million times worth it. And then lastly, pardon. Pardon. Again in its primary sense, for sprinkling with his blood refers to the goal of our election as sons and daughters of God our Father.

It is that we should be forgiven of all our sins, covered as it were, with the precious blood of Christ, our innocent sacrifice. But in its secondary sense, Peter uses it here in connection with our exile.

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it corresponds to the overall impact of our transience and homelessness. Because as Christians we have been forgiven, we are being forgiven, and we will continue to be forgiven.
Forgiven. The land around us, and the world around us, may condemn us for our faith. It may reject and dispossess us of home and land and church. But the longer we go on in loving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to him, being sanctified by his spirit, the more that matters to us isn't what the world thinks of us, but what God thinks of us.
And when God looks at us, the truth is that he does not see anymore our nakedness and shame. He sees the perfect pardoning blood and righteousness of his son Jesus Christ, covering us from head to toe.
[23:54] It's our experience of the grace of the gospel which grows as we're weaned away from the dependence upon this world and we're latched onto the permanence of our Father's love.

Ever since that dramatic fire in Hope Street, 17th of July, 1957, we've been homeless, I think there's only two of us that can remember what the Hope Street Gallic Chapel even looked like and that's Margaret McKinnon and Mary MacDonald.
It may make us feel rather anxious, unsettled. I know I've felt that way many times over the years. I've looked at other congregations with their own buildings with the green eye of envy and wished why couldn't we have a building like they do?
but then I've watched these congregations with their own buildings dwindle and eventually the buildings are put up for sale and are turned into restaurants, nurseries, flats, climbing walls and I've then realised I was wrong to be envious.
God's got a way better plan for us. Glasgow said he's a family we belong to, not a building we come to. Every family has a father and our father isn't a building.
[25:23] Our father is the God of heaven and earth. You might be feeling as I do this morning, Kathner can tell you all week on holiday I've been like a bit of a nervous wreck all week.

You might be feeling unsettled and apprehensive but to our feelings the apostle Peter shows little sensitivity. He rather says good I'm glad you feel that way because perhaps now you might get a chance to experience the reality of living by faith in Christ Jesus.
Because if our exile brings us closer to Jesus, if it makes us less dependent upon this world, if it serves to draw us into a living relationship with Jesus and many others beside us, then this is all worth it.
A million times worth it. let us pray. Our heavenly father, we thank you that though faith isn't something we can see, it's stronger than any mortar, cement or plaster.
We thank you that faith survives the elements and survives the years because it's faith which is sustained by the strength of Christ himself. we ourselves here, perhaps may feel hard done by, but we think of many other Christians all over the world who are in real clear and present danger of being persecuted for their faith.
[26:49] We think of those 14 American Christian families in Haiti who have been kidnapped. We pray for them that you would keep them safe and return them to freedom. Lord, I remember the family of Sir David Ames who has been cruelly murdered.

And Lord, we ask and pray that you sustain them in their grief and comfort them in all their despair. We remember our brothers and sisters all over the world for no other crime than loving Jesus and following him in obedience.
They are brutally murdered and imprisoned and tortured. And Father, we long for a day when darkness shall be extinguished finally, when those who have their minds set on violence and war all the time, would be utterly squashed.
Rather, oh Lord, we set our hope on what is not yet here. That great continuing city of which Abraham and Noah and David and all the greats look forward. Lord, we're looking forward to an experience of you, whether here or whether in Partic, whatever it is, that is so enriching, that it dazzles our minds.
We don't want anything else to do with the worthless things of this world. We just want to press on. We want to press on to see you in all your glory. But Lord, we do remember this building and we remember, oh Lord, how its architect, Greek Thompson, would turn it over to his grave at the thought of its neglect.
[28:25] And Lord, for as many hundreds of emails and letters we've sent to the council, alerting them to different issues and to different dangers and being ignored at every single turn.

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We now look at the devastation upstairs and we are thankful to you, oh Lord, that you have spared all of us. For this could have happened at any stage in the last ten years.
But it happened after we had all decided that we were leaving. Oh, Father, we pray that you would have mercy on our city council and we pray that you would help them to see the necessity of maintaining this as a Christian centre of worship so that in generations to come, Greek Thompson will be known not just for his architecture but for his Christian faith which permeated every area of his life and gave prosperity and flourishing to the city of Glasgow.
Lord, we ask for every other experience in Glasgow's life. our great desire, Lord, is to have a passion for this great city, that it will flourish by the preaching of your word and the praising of your name.
So let it be, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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