

THY KINGDOM COME

NOVENA



REFLECTIONS ON 1 PETER

THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Justin Welby

Thy Kingdom Come: Novena
(Reflections on 1 Peter by Archbishop Justin Welby)
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In the days between Ascension and Pentecost, it has been the habit of many Christians, for many centuries, to make the focus of our prayers the same as those first believers. Christ's last instruction to His disciples on the day of His Ascension is to *'wait for the gift my Father promised'* (Acts 1:4).

¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives... ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying... ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Acts 1:12-14

The instruction to wait for the Holy Spirit is so important because without the Spirit's empowering presence, it is impossible to be a faithful witness to Christ. We need this gift of the Father to be the people Christ is calling us to be. The Spirit then isn't for some private experience, but for the sake of our life for Christ in the world.

Thy Kingdom Come encourages each of us to hold five specific people in mind in these days; so that the gift of the Father would work through us for their sake, but also would touch their own lives. I encourage you now to spend a few moments discerning who you might specifically pray for in these days, and maybe write their names opposite in the space provided.

This Novena seeks to enable you in your waiting for the gift the Father promised, by focusing on nine particular verses in the first letter of St Peter – one of those present in that upper room. Each day we will take one of those verses and seek to be shaped by it. 1 Peter is one of my favourite books, and provides the themes for the Lambeth Conference this summer. It's a book which opens our hearts to God and lifts our eyes to the worldwide family of God.

I am so grateful to *Anna Heslop* who has created the most stunning images to go with the verse for each day. I pray that these words and pictures together open up space for you to wait for the gift the Father has promised.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

1 PETER 1:1-2

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with His blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

To be a Christian is to be marked out as 'different'. In his First Letter the apostle Peter writes to an exiled people, communities who are living as strangers and foreigners in Asia Minor. These people knew what it was like to be alien in their society – harassed and rejected.

But Peter is also writing to a people who are exiled in a different sense: as Christians, we spend our lives on Earth in exile, separated from our eternal home in Heaven with the Father.

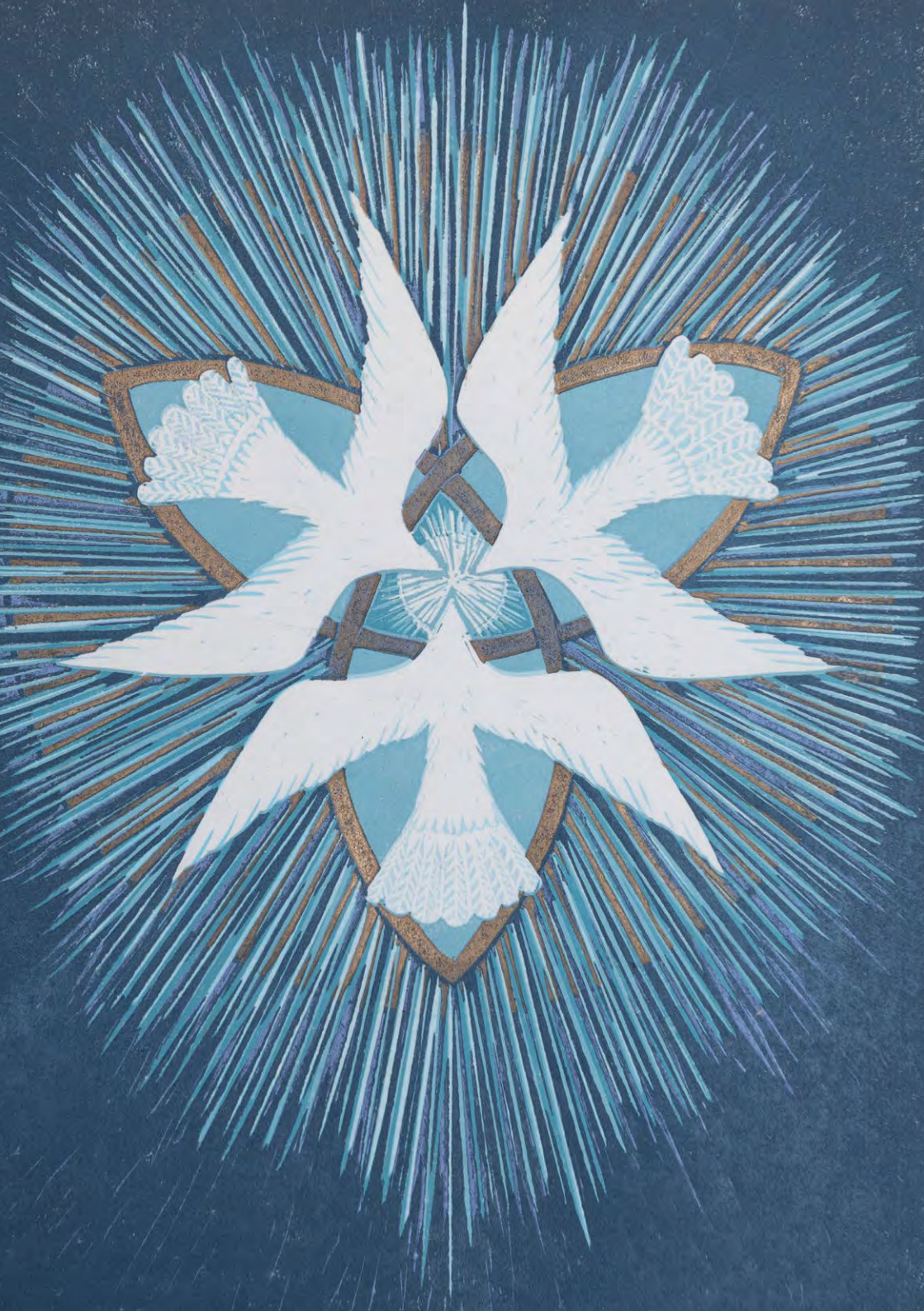
To be a Christian is to have been given a different identity to others: rather than defining ourselves according to our family, our nationality, how much money we have, or any of the other things we sometimes think make us who we are, we, the baptised, are 'in Christ', a deep truth which is both given and yet to be fully realised. We are called to find our identity solely in the person of Jesus Christ.

Peter speaks to those who are exiled but chosen by God. These communities may be reviled on Earth, but they are sanctified – made holy – by the Spirit. Christians are a people who do not consider earthly powers and leaders to be the ultimate source of authority: we are obedient to Jesus.

All this is only made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As we pray fervently for others to turn their hearts and minds for Christ, let us start by asking: how do we live in a way that marks us out as different? Does our witness make people curious about faith, rather than resistant to it? How do I live my life differently because of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and how do others see and hear that?

Peter speaks to real communities facing real problems, but he greets them in the light of God's abundant grace and peace. May you bring that grace and peace to all you meet as you begin this journey today.



1 PETER 1:12

¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Every single person seeks meaning for their life. All of us go through life searching for something. Perhaps we long to be loved, or accepted, or seen for who we really are. Maybe we yearn to understand who we are ourselves, and why we're here on this Earth. We desire to be closer to our God and creator, even if we aren't aware of it. We have this desire for meaning because this is how God has made us. And it is only His meaning which fulfils our searching. *'You have made us O Lord for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You,'* as St Augustine famously put it.

Everyone who has ever lived has known this ache of longing. In today's verse, Peter talks about the prophets. They were searching too: *'inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated'* (1 Peter 1:11). Even though Christ was not yet born, the Holy Spirit was within them, enabling them to anticipate God's greatest gift, Christ Jesus – God with us.

Now that person is revealed, the good news announced; and we are served, we learn, by those prophets who strove to be closer to God, over two and a half thousand years ago. Such is the wonder of God that we don't just make His promise known to those around us, but we can build a chain that may help those seeking long after we are gone.

And the truly astonishing news is that what we long for most has been given to us freely. The God we search for has not only come to us and lived with us; but died for us! We have been brought the good news by the Holy Spirit, sent from heaven! Even the angels have a longing, to look closer into the wonder of our salvation.

Through this gift all are drawn towards salvation. The prophets searched for it. The angels long to look into it! God knows that we long for His presence, but our longing for Him is but a pale reflection of His longing for us. That is why He sent His son. It's why He gives us His spirit.

Calling to mind the five who are the focus of your prayers, what do you detect of their searching? How might you shine light, as the prophets of the Old Testament did, that helps direct people towards the treasure they seek? How can your search – which will last all of your life – point more people towards the God that extends His hand to us, and hopes we might clasp it back?



1 PETER 2:2

²Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.

Babies, born into a strange and harsh new world, are utterly reliant on those who give them care. Their needs and instincts are very basic – food, warmth, love. For these things they are dependent on others, helpless, weak. We call to mind the image of the Christ-child, the God who made Himself small and helpless for the sake of us who are truly helpless without Him. Those Peter is writing to also live in this strange and harsh world, a world where we go wrong, where the only comfort is from God.

But babies grow. Hopefully they become wise, kind, productive members of society – but only with the nourishment of those who care for them. ‘Milk’ in the Bible often represents blessing and abundance: a mother gives her milk freely, out of love, whenever the child needs it, without condition, without the child needing to ‘earn’ or ‘deserve’ it.

It’s a source of life, a sign of care, but it’s also easy to digest. If you give a child meat as soon as they are born, they won’t have the teeth to chew it.

Just so, when we come to Christ, we are born again. We begin a new life as children of God. God gives us space for growth, for maturing, for nurturing – a process which lasts our entire lives. We never outgrow the milk, for what we start with on this journey sustains us throughout our lives as Christians.

What is this milk, which strengthens and feeds us to grow in this new life?

I think it is the word of God – through scripture, and the call of the Holy Spirit on our hearts. We are fragile, but His word strengthens us. We hunger and thirst, and only He can satisfy us. We are surrounded by hatred and division, but His abundant blessing shows us the possibility of love and joy.

Out of the experience of all that has been given to strengthen us, we can call others, and let them be nourished in turn. We can spread the love of God so that those around us might also be strengthened and succoured by His word. What those five friends who we hold before God most deeply need, is given by God.

Christ calls us to be child-like, to lean not on ourselves, but on the promise of God, the person of Jesus, and the presence of the Spirit. Let us be like children, in our simple need for, and dependence on, God alone to strengthen and nourish us, as we grow towards His salvation.





1 PETER 2:5

⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In a building, each and every brick is essential. Christ says that each and every one of us is a living stone of His church, dependent on one another and an essential part of the structure.

Every building begins with the foundation. No structure will ever hold if the foundations aren't deep and sure. As Christians, as living stones in the construction of God, we have one foundation: Jesus Christ. The difference between being the living stones of the Church, and dead wood of our own construction, is the need to renew, deepen and celebrate our foundations in Christ every day. We crumble as soon as we build on any other foundation except Jesus.

In the places to which Peter is writing, buildings were a way for people to show off their power and status. Not unlike today, people would build elaborate monuments, physical structures which denoted success, strength, and social standing. But the Christians Peter addresses were powerless. They couldn't compete with these displays of grandeur, or to celebrate their faith in the power of God through building impressive places of worship.

Taking these words to heart it would seem that for Peter it does not matter if you cannot build huge temples or erect great monuments to God. It is not about these outward displays. The stones He wants are 'rejected by humans but chosen by God' [1 Peter 2:4]. God wants the outcast, the unwanted, the unloved, the rejected. These are the people whose lives can be testament to the greatness or grace. Our lives, our bodies, our very being, bear witness to the transformative power of God who has a place for each one of us. And this happens as we are built together into a spiritual house for God.

To be a living stone is to glorify God with our lives, rather than build for own glory or power. It is to transform the way we understand power and status. It is to go exactly where God needs us to be. It is to transform and be transformed – from being ignored, neglected, and oppressed – to being a part of God's divine plan. It is to inhabit the language of living as God's people. And each person is essential in this. The five that you hold before God in prayer have an essential place to take in His building. Only the Holy Spirit can do this.

Today, we reflect on how our lives glorify God and testify to His grace, in a way that nothing we could ever build ourselves could. Let us pray for deeper and stronger foundations in Jesus that keep us steady, that the Holy Spirit might build us into a dwelling for His glory.



1 PETER 2:9-10

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

I find these verses in 1 Peter to be some of the most compelling passages in scripture. A people once excluded are now embraced. Those who were exiled, now chosen. The reviled have been made holy, the rejected are loved.

Those to whom Peter writes know what it is like to be marginalised, oppressed, and harassed because of their faith. They are people without status – except in the eyes of God. They are unknown and unseen and unimportant. Except to the Creator of the universe.

In this verse, we are called – perhaps challenged – to see ourselves not as the world sees us, but as God sees us. We are called to judge ourselves not according to the values which seem to matter most to the world – status, wealth, power – but according to God's boundless love in Christ. Because of God's work for us in Christ we are called worthy, loved, chosen. You are called worthy, loved, and chosen in the eyes of God.

This is how we learn to be God's people, His 'special possession', rather than people beholden to this world. Ours is a status characterised by abundance, hope, faithfulness, and love. What Christ has done is give a people, who had been told they held no value, a sense of eternal value. When we think we are useless, unimportant, a failure, or an embarrassment, the word of God reminds us who we really are: God's own people.

This is a love that transforms us. But for a purpose. For with the gift comes a calling – so *'that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light'*. We are transformed to be agents of God's transformation; our eyes are opened so we can enable others to truly see.

This addresses the human tendency to judge others as 'less', which we do for all sorts of reasons. In Christ God has chosen them too, they are included, with us, as part of His people. We cannot put boundaries or walls down between us. Those who we might be tempted to exclude, ignore, and reject are exactly those whom God gathers up and welcomes.

Consider your five friends: they are included in on this. Oh! that the Spirit would so move in them that they might come to know it for themselves.

The transformation is incredible. Our marks of shame become signs of God's love. As we pray today, let us pledge to see everyone we meet through the loving eyes of God.



1 PETER 3:4

⁴ Rather, it [your beauty] should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

Whilst we are implored from our early years not to judge a book by its cover, it is something we have a hard time adhering to. But scripture is unequivocal: *'Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment'* [John 7:24]. It's hardly surprising – most of the people who saw Christ upon the cross merely recognised a criminal, a man suffering a shameful and humiliating death. All most people saw was a failed messiah – unable to see the incredible truth – God triumphing over evil for our sakes. Things are not always what they seem.

But appearance is important for us. There is so much in how we present ourselves. So many of us feel we have to pretend, to fit in, to look a certain way in order to be accepted. Our perceptions of beauty are based on scarcity; they are temporal and limited; they are a cause for comparison and jealousy, insecurity and lack. But this is not how God values us, and it's not how He wants us to value ourselves.

By contrast, the qualities of what St Peter calls, 'the inner spirit' are abundant and unlimited. They leave us feeling joyful, rather than jealous, inspired rather than insecure. Cultivating external beauty is an attempt to feel good about ourselves. Building internal beauty makes others feel good too.

The women Peter is addressing have little social status. They were often objectified, often seen as something to be 'owned,' rather than as individual humans seen and loved by God. Yet Peter recognises that they have a rich inner life – one that is subversive to the expectations of the time – a life lived not for others but for Jesus. Peter affirms that neither men nor masters are the supreme authority, but the God who makes us in His own image.

Chris Jesus – the one in whom God is made – calls us to see people for who they really are. It's a call to really and truly hear and know people properly, to work with God's Spirit who encounters us and opens us up in our deepest places. All too often we tell people about Jesus without trying to hear their story first. All too often we judge before we know the truth. Today we reflect on the true beauty we will surely encounter if we put our trust in God's abundant love, rather than our own fear of not being enough. Only God can enable this.

Let us pray for our five friends, that God would connect with them by His Spirit to their spirit.

The only thing that brings people to God is the person of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. He doesn't need anything else from us, He simply asks our love in return.



1 PETER 3:18

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

Suffering is an inevitable part of our lives. Peter is writing to suffering communities, people who are experiencing significant hardship because of their faith in Christ. Their courage and vulnerability during this exile, Peter seems to suggest, is not just a sign of their faith in Christ, but follows the model of Jesus' example of the Cross.

Being a Christian has never offered an escape from suffering. Jesus' death and resurrection doesn't exempt us from painful experiences, from feeling rejected or lost. It doesn't stop bad things happening to us. We will be injured, we will grieve, we will be humiliated. Ultimately we will die. What Jesus has done for us does not guarantee us a pain-free life.

But what His death does do is open up the door to us knowing and experiencing God's blessing, even – sometimes most intensely and profoundly – amid suffering. What Christ's suffering on the Cross does offer is the intimacy of a God who loves us so deeply that He was willing to bear the pain we previously had to experience alone. What His resurrection does promise is eternal life with the Father, even throughout the reality of our temporal lives.

The most extraordinary thing is that God suffers this unimaginable pain for us, whilst we were still His enemies. He is willing to die for us, even though we are the ones who rejected Him. As we continue to pray today for those five who are yet to come to Jesus, let's celebrate the fact that Christ has already died for them, already counts them as loved, and desires to be with them in their pain as well. We pray that they might be made alive by His Holy Spirit.

In this passage, Peter places suffering on a whole new, cosmic axis. What God has done for us reverberates around the whole universe, and yet is centred on one beaten, broken man. Later, Peter writes: *'You are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may be glad and shout for joy when His glory is revealed'*. Our sufferings are not trivial to the God who intimately knows suffering. But they are not final either. On the other side of suffering is victory. For what took place in Jesus takes place in us – death in the body but being made alive in the Spirit.

May those you know who are experiencing suffering today feel the arms of God comforting and guiding them. With God, suffering never has the last word.



1 PETER 4:6

⁶ For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

Sometimes we make happen the very things we most want to avoid. One thing we often fear, and yet create for ourselves, is separation. We feel distant from those who are different to us, those we consider 'other'. We feel separated from those who have gone before. Sometimes we feel separated from God. Some people we think are beyond reach. Sometimes we feel beyond reach ourselves, consumed by darkness, loneliness, and fear.

What a profound message then for us in this passage. Jesus descends into the darkness, into the places we fear most, to bring us out of death and into life. Those who are consumed by darkness hear the Good News and are brought into the glorious light of God. Those who are dead are made to live new lives, which witness to the miracles of God.

Many people may be physically alive, but they are not truly living. There are those who live submerged by circumstances, situations, and anxieties. The gospel gives people new life – God turns dead ends into turning points, rejection into acceptance, death into new life. It says that no-one is beyond redemption. There is no sin God doesn't forgive when repentance is true. Those whom we give up on, whom we consider past hope, God never stops searching for. When they are found, God celebrates: *'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'* (Luke 15:6).

The generosity of God overflows with such power that even death is swept away. Whilst we do not fully understand the mechanisms of salvation, we are encountered by the one who gives life to the dead.

Where people turn away, God welcomes. Where we are tempted to judge, God calls us to love. When flesh inevitably dies, spirit lives. It is a call to live according to God's standards, rather than wither according to our own. Pray today for your five friends; the Spirit of the one who crosses every boundary to bring the message of His love might reach them.

As you pray for your five people today, remember this: no one is beyond the presence and promise of God.



1 PETER 4:14

¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Hope in the midst of persecution is a clear theme throughout the Book of 1 Peter. It's both an encouragement and a promise – suffering will give way to glory. It works through the past, present and future: Jesus has prevailed on the cross and in raising Him to life God the Father has overcome death. The Holy Spirit is with us in the here and now. Christ will return in glory. There is every reason for hope.

Here, Peter takes something considered by the contemporary world to be shameful – for the community he writes to, and for many people around the world today, it is being a Christian.

Jesus died whilst being mocked, insulted, and berated. He died in shame. Yet this is what He was born to do, the hour for which He came. For this death reveals the glory of God. God's glory seen in the humiliation of Christ, as God bears our sin and shares our pain. The glory of God is how He loves us. This shameful death transforms shame into victory, unholiness into holiness.

Life as a Christian isn't all suffering. It's experiencing the joy which the certainty of the hope brings, even in the darkest times. The promise of a world where everything will one day be made new.

When people see that hope being lived, incredible things can happen. The living God gives people a living hope.

As we live as Christians we experience God's blessings, even as we know humankind's suffering. St Paul talks about us sharing His sufferings, that we may enter into His glory. It is the depth of glory found in the unexpected places, in the darkest corners, in those who are rejected and abused. It is knowing that God considers us worth dying for, and that no experience of suffering or sorrow is able to overcome the capacity of God to bring life.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Whatever we are going through, the prayer, 'Come Holy Spirit' changes things. Pray most especially the Holy Spirit would so work in your five friends that they are able to enter into glory through the sufferings of Christ.

In the beauty, the magnificence, and the joy of our lives, as well as the suffering and the pain, is the glory of God who will come again.

May the Spirit of glory be upon you, and upon those you pray for, today and all your days.





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