

Welcome to the first of a series of talks looking at what the Christian life is like.
First off the blocks is The Church Family.

It may surprise you to know that Christianity is probably one of the hardest of all religions to follow.

So hard it is impossible, at least on our own, hence the need for a family.

If you want a religion in which you have any hope of meeting it's demands, if you want a comfortable, "make me feel good about myself " kind of religion, then don't choose Christianity.

This is because no other religion confesses Jesus Christ as God and as the Saviour of the world. If Christians went round saying that Jesus was just a very good man, a prophet even, then that would probably make us acceptable to the world and if we did, then we would not be His followers.

Proclaiming the truth that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven means that we can expect to be persecuted.

Jesus told His disciples that the world would hate them because it hated him first.

One of the hardest things to do is to love someone who is persecuting you.

Yet the Apostle Peter wrote a letter to Christians in Asia Minor, now modern Turkey, as a way of encouraging them to do just that.

Turn to Page 859 in the Blue Bibles and we'll read 1 Peter 1:1 - 9 READ PETER

Part of the message of 1 Peter is that life is painful so you'd better get used to it, and Peter acknowledges that right at the beginning with the words "strangers" and "scattered".

Peter wrote this letter to Christians when Nero was the Roman Emperor.

Nero had a really bad reputation, his vanity and lust for power knew no limits and when in AD 64 a fire destroyed half the city of Rome, Nero laid the blame on the Christians.

They had apparently brought a curse on Rome because they would not worship the Roman gods and they were accused of cannibalism, which was how Communion was interpreted.

Christians were arrested, executed, used as torches and thrown to the lions.

One of the writers of the time says that the Christians were requested to stop singing as they were being eaten by the lions because it was putting them off their food!

It was not a good time to be a Christian. Many had been thrown out of their home cities of Rome and Jerusalem and were now having a tough time in Turkey.

But amazingly because of this persecution the Gospel went out through the Roman world, so there were tiny islands of Christian faith surrounded by great oceans of paganism. However, these pagan cultures soon followed Nero's lead and became increasingly hostile.

1 Peter was written in the shadow of martyrdom as the Roman Empire became increasingly opposed to the Christian faith.

The lives of the early Christians were such a rebuke to the Empire that they were hated. They were a rebuke to its greed, violence, godlessness and worship of power.

In this country, at the moment, Christians are not under that kind of persecution.

But I can't help wondering how long this situation will last.

How long will it be before Christians in this country, a country that many non-Christians still think of as a Christian land, come under fear and suspicion and hate as they do in some parts of the world?

Last year, Region College in Vancouver produced this statistic:

In 1998, one hundred and fifty seven thousand Christians were killed because of their faith.

In this country, whilst you would not expect to give your life for your faith, you may well find out what it is like to be alone, strangers, isolated, and marginalised by your non-Christian friends and family.

It may get around that you've become religious, and you find yourself politely frozen out, not being invited to parties and the like.

Some of you may have already experienced some form of persecution simply by coming on this course.

Friends or family may be asking, "What do you want to do that for?",
telling you that you're going through a phase;
"You don't really believe all that nonsense, do you?"

Being pressured to do something that you know is wrong,
"No one will know",
"It doesn't really matter" they might say.

But you know that God knows, and on the Day of Judgement it really will matter.

But the greatest source of pain can be your family, they may not understand.

Your core values will change and they will see you going in a different direction and that can be very hard.

Of course they know you so well, they know what buttons to press, so when you come home saying you are a Christian, they may think,

"Okay, let's press this button; and see if they're still a Christian!"

Please be under no illusions - being a follower of Jesus Christ is not easy. And even experience and maturity does not make it any easier. You just have different difficulties.

Being a Christian does not mean that God will take away your problems, but He will give you the grace to cope with them.

Which leads us to 3 questions:

Why is the Christian life so hard?

Is it really worth it?

and Why not just merge into the background?

After all, if we aren't too enthusiastic or too committed then we won't be misunderstood, frozen out or rejected.

Part of the reason that the Christian life is so hard is because of what God commands us to do.

All religions, including Christianity, have rules and laws that the follower of the religion should adhere to.

Whilst all the rules and laws are to be kept, there are some that are more important, rules and laws that are, if you like, fundamental.

The difference between Christianity and all other religions is that all the other religions require you to keep the laws in order to get to heaven, whereas for Christians getting to heaven is simply a matter of faith in Jesus.

Christians, obey the rules not because they have to, but because they want to. As Christians we obey God's laws out of gratitude for what Jesus has done rather than any idea that it makes God love us any more than He does already.

There is a single fundamental law that God wants us to follow as Christians. Unfortunately, what God commands of us is realistically impossible for us to meet on our own.

Mark chapter 12 gives us this fundamental law and it's here on the overhead.

READ MARK FROM THE OHP

Here we see the two great commandments, which can be summed up in a single word - LOVE. Love of God, and love of neighbour.

This is not just a one off. God commands us to love.

That is every single moment of our lives is to be characterised by love.

Love of God and love of our neighbour.

But who is my neighbour?

When Jesus was asked this very question he told the parable of the good Samaritan which tells us that everyone is our neighbour.

People whom we have never seen,
people that we don't get on with as well as those we do, people that we don't particularly like,
people who hate us as well as those that love us;
they are all our neighbours,
and Christ commands that we love them all,
all of the time.

Let me show you how it is impossible for us to meet this command, if we are honest with ourselves, to all of the people all of the time.

Here is the challenge to us.

READ CORINTHIANS FROM THE OHP

To me that sounds just like Jesus, so instead of saying "Love is ..." we should be able to say "Jesus is ... ". Read the text with me again, this time we'll put Jesus instead of love.

Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind.
Jesus does not envy, Jesus does not boast, Jesus is not proud.
Jesus is not rude, Jesus is not self-seeking, Jesus is not easily angered,
Jesus keeps no record of wrongs.
Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
Jesus never fails.

That does describe Jesus because Jesus is love.
Are we?

True love is characterised by other-person-centredness.
Jesus lived His whole life being other-person-centred, loving God and neighbour.
He was not self-centred at all and you've only got to look at the cross and resurrection to see that.

As Christians we should be like Jesus, so instead of saying "Love is ..." we should be able to put our own name?
Let's see shall we?

Richard is patient, Richard is kind.
Richard does not envy, Richard does not boast, Richard is not proud.

How many of us are feeling a little uncomfortable - I know I am.

The thing is, unlike Jesus I am not always patient, I am not always kind, and I know that there are times when I struggle with pride.

And that's just the first sentence.

And if by some miracle you don't believe me then just ask my wife!

I did warn you - loving your neighbour is impossible without a doubt, at least to all of the people all of the time.

You may be comfortable saying it all, but as the letter of James reminds us - if your words are not backed up by action then your words are empty.

Faith without deeds is a dead faith, and only a living faith, only a faith actioned out in our lives will get us to heaven.

So how can anyone really live the Christian life?

Well, when you become a Christian something marvellous happens - God comes and dwells in you.

When you put your faith in Jesus, when you repent of your sin, when you ask for His forgiveness, He sends the Holy Spirit to come and live in you, to help you to live the Christian life.

The Holy Spirit is God, and so God Himself guides you and helps you to meet His own demands to love all the people all of the time, just like God Himself does.

The Holy Spirit gives us the resources, God's resources, to live the Christian life.

So I can say, Richard with God's help is patient, Richard with God's help is kind, etc.

No other religion promises such a thing - that God Himself will come and live in you! That God Himself will help you to do what He commands.

But why should the love of our neighbour be such an impossible task?

For as Christians we are reborn into God's image and we have God's resources at our disposal.

Well, part of the reason is that we live in a sinful, fallen world, and whilst we live in this world we will continue to be affected by our sinful nature.

In this life there is no such thing as a completed Christian, we are all under construction. We don't become the finished product until the day Jesus returns in glory.

Our second question was - Is it really worth it?

And Peter gives us some fantastic answers to that question in just the first 3 verses of his letter.

He tells us in verses 1 and 2 that we are God's elect. We have been chosen by God, and made clean and acceptable in His eyes through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ.
And verse 3 tells us that we have been born into a new family, the family of God.
We are God's children and God, as the Lord's Prayer says, is "Our Father who is in heaven".

I find just these 3 verses so wonderful, so uplifting.
To know that I am God's son gives me such a release.

It is so liberating to know that I am loved by God, that I am so precious to Him.

We all long to feel security and status desiring things like a career, a pension, a nice house, a wife that can cook, children and grandchildren to do well at school, or even a husband who says "I love you" and means it.

As a Christian I no longer need that sort of security and status because I know I am loved by God, I am precious to Him.

I desire instead to know God more, to meet His command to love Him with all my heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love my neighbour as myself.

So is it worth it? Without a doubt – Yes.

However, 99.9% of the blessings of the Christian life are in the world to come.
Which means that all the blessings that God gives us in this life only accounts for 0.1% so I can't wait to see what He's got for me in Heaven!

In this life, your emotions will go up and down, you will cry, be frustrated; but in heaven there will be no pain, no parting, no death.

Revelation 21:4 says this "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."
What an intimate picture that that paints. Wiping tears from our eyes - it's so intimate.

That is why it is worth it, because of what we are looking towards - our heavenly inheritance.

An inheritance that no one can take away from us, so we can rest and rejoice in that future.
That is the Christian peace and joy.

Verse 5 of Peter's letter tells us that we are shielded by God's power so that we can receive our inheritance and that's the reason that I'm a Christian today
– not because I have been faithful to God but that He has been faithful to me and shielded me - kept me safe.

God is keeping this inheritance for me, I am definitely going to get it.
This promise is for all who confess Christ Jesus as the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

And here in verses 15 and 16 is the reason why we can not just fade into the background. "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be Holy, because I am Holy."

Let me explain what being holy means.

If something is made holy then it has been set apart for a specific purpose, it is different. For example, if I take a tea-spoon and put it in the sugar bowl and state that this tea-spoon is only to be used for serving sugar.

Then I have made that tea-spoon holy.

That tea-spoon has been set apart for a specific purpose, ie. serving sugar.

It is different from other tea-spoons because of that.

Verses 15 and 16 tell us that just as God is different so we are to be different.

We are set apart by God to do His purpose, we are Holy.

The exciting thing is that He doesn't leave us to get on with it under our own steam, but He comes beside us and gives us a hand.

We'll be looking at that in more detail next week as we look at the work of the Holy Spirit, but what a great picture that is that we have the privilege of working with God to help Him complete His purposes in this world.

I just find that so fantastic.

I have made much of the fact that you, if you become a Christian, will be persecuted and that living the Christian life is not easy.

Being persecuted is not a maybe, but a definite will, not an if but when.

Be clear, be very clear - Trials will come.

But these trials, whilst we may not think so at the time, are actually beneficial.

No I haven't gone mad, look at verse 7 here on the overhead.

"These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Trials are like exercise. You put your muscles under pressure so that they grow.

There is a very real sense of "no pain, no gain" in the Christian life.

What we must remember is that one day these trials will be over (when Christ is revealed means when he returns) and that we have heaven to look forward to.

But in the meantime, because we know that Christ is with us and the future belongs to him

we are filled with, in verse 8, "an inexpressible and glorious joy" - the joy of knowing that ultimately we are on the winning side.

But let us not forget God's command that we are to love.
We see that here in verse 22.

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart."

Here is God's command again: love one another deeply from the heart.

Just as with loving God and our neighbour, Peter is not talking about loving because you find the other person loveable or attractive or because they love you in return.
It's a command. This love is a product of our will.

God is directing us to exercise our will in a loving way towards everyone in His family.
Why? Because that is how God loves you. Be holy as I am holy, He says.

When Christians look at the cross we should feel such gratitude that in our relationship with one another our stubborn hearts are melted.
The cross brings this love into relationships.

So we should love others as God loves us.

That may seem hard but if you exercise your will in a loving way, you will find that a real love for your brothers and sisters in Christ grows.
And I know that from my own personal experience.

John Wesley once wrote that the Christian life meant for him, "doing all the good I can to all the people I can by all the means I can as often as I can because I will not pass this way again."

This love must be sincere, not hypocritical, not an act.

In Greek plays the actors, from where we get our word hypocritical, carried around masks in front of their faces to show when they were happy, sad, good or evil.

Peter is saying that our love must not be like a mask.
Because you have been born into a new family, you must love your brothers and sisters sincerely from the heart.

The authentic badge of Christian discipleship is love for other Christians.
Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another.
As I have loved you, so you must love one another.
By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Here is a quote written by a non-Christian in 125 AD about the Christian community:

"They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them.

They love one another.

He that has distributes liberally to him that does not have.

If they see a stranger they bring him under their own roof and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother.

For they call themselves brothers not after the flesh but after the spirit."

Isn't that such a beautiful picture of how life, how the Church, should be?

What defined the community was other-person-centredness, that is

"the other person is more important than I am, and

what I possess I make freely available to the Church Family."

The mark of the true Christian is that they don't just say these things but they are followed up by actions, otherwise they are just cheap words.

So remember who you are - the elect,

what you have - an inheritance,

and where you are going - heaven.

Get your anchors in place because a storm is coming.

But you can't compel someone to love.

Whilst we are free to love or not to love - God is calling us to exercise our will.

Loving deeply means opening yourself to rejection, opening up your resources for your brothers and sisters in Christ means that people can advantage of you.

Love that is unconditional is costly, but that is the love that God has for you and what you should have for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

So where do we begin to love one another deeply from the heart?

Proverbs 13:20 says this,

"He who walks with the wise grows wise,
but a companion of fools suffers harm."

When you go for a walk with someone you are having a relational experience.

Walks are usually about the sharing of thoughts and feelings with someone whom you want to be with.

The destination of the walk isn't really important.

The writer of Proverbs is saying that walking is actually, to some degree, about choosing friends wisely.

The values and convictions and morals of the people you walk closely with will find their way into your own life.

We are deeply affected by our close friends whether we like it or not.

So, if you're walking with people whose judgements are faulty, then they will cause you to take wrong steps.

So if it is important to walk with the right people you might be tempted to say stuff it and do it by yourself,
just you and God.

Once upon a time in a land not so far away, a young Christian went to a wise old man and said,

"Wise old man, please help me. I have been a Christian for a while now but I seem to have lost the joy, the desire to pray and read the Bible that I once had. How can I get that back?"

The wise old man, said nothing because he was very wise, and gestured to the young man to sit down beside him in front of the coal fire.

"Please give me your wise answer wise old man", the young man said as he sat down beside the coal fire which was glowing a soothing red.

The old man smiled wisely and bade the young man to be quiet.

He then took a lump of red hot coal out of the fire and put it on the hearth in front of the young man.

They watched as the glow faded from the coal and it turned from red to black.

The wise old man looked enquiringly, as only wise old men can, at the young man.

The young man looked at the wise old man in expectation of the wisdom that he was about to utter, but the wise old man just smiled and placed the coal back into the fire.

When the coal had heated back up and was once again glowing from the heat that it had received from the other coals, the old man took it out of the fire again and placed it on the hearth in front of the now confused young man.

Again it turned black, and again the wise old man put it back into the fire, and again it began to glow red hot.

The wise old man continued to take the coal out and put it back into the fire to heat up until the young man understood what the wise old man was telling him.

The young man left the wise old man and started meeting with like-minded Christians, and lived happily ever after.

And the moral of the story is this:

The young man was that lump of coal.

Away from the Church family, he had no means of receiving the fire that he needed to stay alive in the faith,

he had no glow.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says it like this,

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:
If one falls down, his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up!
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

This is what you've got to get in place if you're to survive as a Christian and receive your inheritance.

This is the key to the Christian life and the heart of the Church Family, that you don't walk alone.

So develop a close band of personal relationships - a handful of companions, because if you've got a team of good friends around you then you will be able to take the pressure when it comes.

And in terms of building a team you need to be pro-active.

You need to find friends with whom and for whom you can pray, whom you can contact if you're in a hassle, friends to whom you will be committed and who will help you to follow Christ.

Let me give you a real life example of that.

I had a phone call a few months ago from someone who is known to people in the church. The conversation, for some reason, left me with the impression that she was suicidal.

I did not know whether my impression was a true impression or not, but nevertheless I needed to do something - just in case!

So the first I thing I did was to ring a couple of people and after telling them briefly about the conversation I asked them to pray firstly for this person, and secondly for me. Having done that, I was then able to get on and eventually find that my fears were unfounded.

But the point is this - I was able to contact a couple of good friends, tell them very little about the situation, but nonetheless be able to rely on them to do what I asked. Which was to pray for this person and for myself.

I knew that I could rely on my friends, and they knew that I would not be ringing them up at a late hour unless I felt it was important!

So where do we go to meet people in order to build our team?

Well, on Tuesday nights at 7:30 we have a course you may be interested in, called Christianity Explained.

Which you might like to come along to, to find out what Christianity is about and to meet some nice people and make some new friends.

Or if that doesn't sound like your cup of tea then you could join a House group.

House groups are a forum for a group of people to meet in someone's house (hence the name) and to pray together, to pray for each other and to study the Bible together.

It's a place where you can give and receive support and encouragement with people who you can be open with, and where anything you divulge is treated in confidence.

To know more about house groups and how you go about joining one then please speak to David, myself, Jane or Fiona.

And last but not least, there is the church building. Every Sunday, we meet here to worship God and to build our team, and you will be made most welcome if you want to come along.

So in summary.

The Lord our God is one Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. This is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

But you can't do this alone, God gives you His Holy Spirit who provides you with the resources to live the Christian life, and He also provides His Family out of which should come your closest friends - the people that you walk wisely with.

Christianity is about relationships. Relationships with God and with His Family.

And these relationships should be other-person-centred - The other person should mean more to me than I do to myself.

As Christians we must maintain our distinctiveness, even at the cost of being misinterpreted, whilst not opting out of society.

We are to remain in the world, to give a practical demonstration of the Gospel, but not to be ruled by the values of this world.

This letter of Peter is a letter of encouragement to Christians, helping us find our bearings in a society that seems not to understand us any more, and which presents us with many problems.

Living the Christian life is not easy, there may be times when you feel that you can't go on with it, times when you feel like giving up.

Those are the times when you will be grateful that God has blessed you with friends, with brothers and sisters in His family that love you deeply from their hearts.

Going to a church is not simply about worshipping God, although that is part of the reason.

Wherever the followers of Christ meet that is where the Church Family is.

The Church Family is here tonight.

Jesus said that where 2 or more are gathered in my name there shall I be also.

Coming to the church, this building, is also about making friends, building teams, encouraging people, building them up in the faith, and in turn they will encourage and help to build others up.

Let me make sure that you've got that.

Meeting with the Church Family is about you making friends, you building your team, you encouraging your team, you building them up in the faith and they in turn will encourage and help to build you up in the faith, for as you give so shall you receive.

If you do decide to become a Christian, or indeed if you are already a Christian, then please make that effort to cultivate relationships, to build your team and to encourage them.

Love them deeply from your heart, because one day you will be so grateful that you did.

Earlier I gave a quote from a non-Christian about the early Church, here it is on the overhead again.

"They walked in all humility and kindness, and falsehood was not found among them.

They loved one another.

Those that had distributed liberally to those that did not have.

If they saw a stranger they brought them under their own roof and rejoiced over them as if they were their own brother or sister.

For they called themselves brothers and sisters not after the flesh but after the spirit."

Thank you for listening and now it's time for the group discussion.