



*As prepared for delivery:*

The reading we have just heard from 1 Peter has been used to justify great evil. It has been used to support slavery, to uphold empire, to defend those who perpetrate domestic violence.

We know that slavery is wrong. We know domestic violence is wrong. We know that empire building is wrong. We know it in our hearts.

But we are part of a church whose history is wrapped up in empire, power-seeking and subjugation. It is history of resistance as well as complicity.

In 1867, Archbishop Longley invited bishops to the first Lambeth Conference. It was a chance to ‘discuss the peculiar difficulties and perplexities in which our widely-scattered Colonial Churches are involved, and the evils to which they are exposed’; churches bound together ‘only by the ties of kindred...to offer up united prayers and praise to the Most High in the mother tongue common to us all...’

Think for a moment on these foundational words for that first Lambeth Conference, and turn to a person near you to discuss:

- What do these words from Archbishop Longley say to you?
- Are they shocking? Why?
- How have we as a church/Communion, collaborated with empire?
- Or colluded with empire and structural sin - slavery, abuse, and the condemnation of brothers and sisters in Christ?

The uncomfortable truth is that the church has power.

Everybody gathered in this room has authority in some way – perhaps by virtue of our office, our position, our connection with the church, our gender, our socio-economic class – even if not in other ways.

Power can look different in different relationships and from different perspectives. Someone in Canada, the USA, or the UK might feel weaker because we are outnumbered by Global South and yet money, comfort, and medicine makes them strong. The experience of someone in Pakistan or Nigeria or Ghana might be that they are vulnerable because they are a persecuted minority - but in different context they are mighty indeed.

So what happens when we look at ourselves? When we make visible the structures of empire and the history and present reality of power? And what do we do with the reality that structures of power, of empire, slavery, and submission of women are part of our Scripture?

We are good at condemning some of these things, but we don’t do so uniformly. Wives and slaves are explicitly compared in 1 Peter. And yet we

are confident in condemning slavery, but less confident condemning systems that keep women, girls and wives in situations of domestic violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Slavery is seen as part of the ancient world, a system that must be rejected in contemporary contexts by Christians. The system of patriarchy has not yet been discarded and left behind in the same way. But 1 Peter does not allow us to make this distinction.

For many in our Communion, this is a difficult letter. Faced with a text that appears to accept the authority of human institutions, slavery, and submission of wives or women, we are challenged by how best to interpret this text, and even more to know how best to live it out.

1 Peter may be offering a deliberately ambiguous command. Those of the dominant order – the emperor or his governors – who might intercept such literature would understand one thing, while the intended recipients would hear something quite different.

What Peter does for us is make visible the invisible structures of our world. In particular it makes visible the insidious mechanisms of empire.

There are many lordless powers in our world today whose authority seems so pervasive, we sometimes don't question enough our existence within them and our relationship to them – be that financial systems, international trading, or the systems that exploit the vulnerable, the refugee, the child, the sex worker, or systems that tolerate domestic violence and which encourage human trafficking

Slavery and patriarchy are the two most prevalent and enduring systems of the ancient world, so widespread that they are all but invisible.

This letter makes them visible.

The letter addresses slaves and wives directly. They are seen. They are recognised. They are acknowledged as human beings with their own inner lives.

We must recognise with Peter just how precarious life is for the slaves who are part of the community of believers. Because they serve two masters – the slave-master and God – there is a dangerous tension at the very core of their lives. They live with the unbearable reality of freedom in Christ and slavery in the Graeco-Roman system. God's chosen and liberated people, yet shackled and with little choice themselves.

Scripture offers multiple ways to respond to such tensions, ranging from conformity to resistance within the dominant system. Peter errs on the side of survival. Resistance to powerful and deep-rooted systems, such as slavery, could well lead to death. Peter holds the tension between faithfulness and survival.

These exhortations to honour the emperor, while fearing God, hold before us the vulnerability of most Christians in the first century.

It confirms for us what Peter means when he calls his community 'aliens and exiles'.

1 Peter encourages Christians today who find themselves in positions of persecution and marginalization and reminds Christians living in a dominant Christian society not to grow too comfortable.

This letter aligns the unjust suffering of the persecuted with the unjust suffering of Christ himself. Christ's suffering is not merely a historical fact, it is an example for the listeners and readers of the letter who are to 'follow in his steps'.

Jesus not only leaves his followers an example, but by freeing them from the power of sin, he also offers them a model for living justly in the midst of injustice. Christ's example of resilient endurance in the face of systemic, unjust suffering is a real example of an actual, lived reality.

And even as they endure suffering, they are being watched over by the shepherd who knows full well what it is to endure injustice and who will ultimately vindicate their suffering, just as the Father vindicated him.

The letter turns from slaves to wives. This new section begins with 'in the same way'. It directly connects the forms of authority.

We must grapple with a text that uses the same kind of argument for slaves and women or wives.

In the ancient world slaves and women occupied a similar social status, as objects of elite men. Neither slaves nor women had power. It's a status that fits well into the wider community of 1 Peter since we know aliens and exiles do not have power either.

Women belonged to their husbands. Peter recognizes this cultural reality, but seems to subvert it as well. These women are not to be ordered or intimidated by their husbands, but 'do what is good' in the sight of God.

Once again, Peter counsels survival: 'doing what is good' within the system in order to survive the system.

The letter then turns to 'husbands'. The force of the repetition of 'in the same way' suggests that there is, once again, a similar argument here.

Husbands are exhorted to recognize that women generally - and their own wives in particular - are the 'weaker sex' (literally: 'vulnerable bodies') in this alien world, and so to 'pay honour' to their wives who are 'also heirs of the gracious gift of life' in God.

They must do what the dominant order does not do – honour those whom society considers beneath them. If they conform to the way of life of the dominant powers, they face the danger of disruption in their relationship with God, the risk that they 'may hinder your prayers'. For 1 Peter, a right relationship with God requires a right relationship with women.

There are parts of our contemporary world where little has changed from Peter's time.

There are parts of our world in which the system of slavery has been rejected by the Church, but not the system of patriarchy.

And there are parts of our world in which both systems have been rejected.

Such different contexts will mean we all approach 1 Peter quite differently.

But Peter turns to 'all'. He is not just addressing a select group who are supposed to be unified, but everyone.

All are called to unity, together; reconciliation requires compassion, sympathy, suffering, humility and love. Up to this point Peter has dealt with different parts of the community in turn, giving different wisdom for slaves, wives, and husbands. Now Peter asserts that the 'unity' of the community is vital.

They are, together in Christ, a holy people, a chosen nation. There is a single calling, even if its application may differ depending on their individual place in their exile.

The question Peter continues to grapple with in this section is this: how do those who are required 'to accept the authority of' the dominant systems of the day - slavery and patriarchy - reconcile this submission with the call to 'sanctify Christ as Lord' (3.15)?

1 Peter 3, verses 15–16, serve as a hinge for the whole of the letter. Those who follow Christ are told to be ready to make a testimony for the hope that is in them, even in the midst of great suffering.

This is not dreary work. It is a testimony of joy in the resurrected victory of Christ who offers a living hope, and to whom in the end, all powers submit.

In resurrection life Jesus is always victor. Those who live under conditions they cannot control – illness, pain, displacement, unjust regimes, unjust authority – all live as children of this Lord who, in his suffering, was redeeming the world, and in his victory is Lord and judge of this world.

The central affirmation in this chapter, as in the letter as a whole, is that we are not left comfortless. We live in a world where Christ is Lord.

So how do we give an account of the hope that is in us? How do we challenge systems of power but also dismantle fear – especially when power does threaten death for some gathered here, and when the fear is very real indeed?

If we cannot recognise where we have power, we become dangerous. Those who take power seriously are more conscious of their vulnerability. When we recognise it, power can be responsibly tempered and used to empower others, rather than abused for personal or institutional gain.

Power is not a zero-sum game. The more you share it the more there is, and the more it can be used for the benefit of others.

The first invitation to the Lambeth Conference was laden with words of empire, patriarchy, and colonialism. But it was also a call to come together to pray, to be united with one another, and to hold onto hope.

This call is found in 1 Peter: the call to unity, to follow in Christ’s footsteps, to keep hold of hope that is held for us in Christ, and practice genuine, constant, mutual love for all those in Jesus Christ.

*Through prayer, Bible study, fellowship and discussion, the conference community will explore what it means for the Anglican Communion to be responsive to the needs of our 21st Century world. Read 1 Peter and find out more about the theme and biblical focus [here](#).*

9 min read

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