



This week at Magdalen Road church we continued our series thinking about our current culture and how Jesus is still such good news! Each week we are considering a different theme, threat or tendency trying to understand our times, and then applying the Scriptures to begin to give us the start of an answer for how we should think and respond.

This week we were considering that our society is very angry and polarised. Partly that comes from the reality of our diverse cities and the fact that in a small area there can be a massive variety of people living, but we're not that great at engaging with each other. We don't necessarily understand each other's cultures or worldviews or experiences, which can easily lead to conflict.

We also reminded how our online lifestyle can be unhelpful in this as behind the screen we can be harsher and less able to engage with each other and less loving.

We looked at a couple of current media stories and drew out examples of how our current world works. We looked again at the story of the Oxford Professor John Finnis and considered the dehumanising language used of him due to his 'abhorrent' views (at least in terms of how the majority think now), as well as a story from Washington last weekend with an apparent altercation between a teenage catholic school boy and an elder from the Omaha Native American tribe. We considered the role of the media and the different stances and agendas that different media outlets will have, as well as the danger of instantaneous reactions and responses to stories, only to find the original story was not actually the story. As more information comes, so the story is found to be more nuanced and complex. We also referred to the role of identity politics as well as different people groups - often those who have been marginalised and faced injustice in the past - gather around a common cause. In part that may be a good thing, but also then they can be negative consequences as people claim to feel 'insulted' or 'unsafe' and the conversation then quickly closes down. For fear of offending we can be more and more reluctant to speak out or question the majority view.

We then thought about Peter's first letter (1 Peter 2v4-12), the context of persecution, and the way in which Peter seeks to encourage them to remember their identity as the people of God and especially how they ought to respond to a watching world.

Interestingly from the outset we saw that Jesus polarises people (!) either he is rejected or accepted...

+ A Building upon him

Even though Jesus was rejected by humans (see the gospels!) that was always part of God's plan. He is building a temple of people, a priesthood even. Just as Jesus was rejected though, so we as living stones will be - we follow in his footsteps. But despite that we saw that we are:

- A people - being built together. - No longer polarised and causing factions, but rather united and part of a body together.
- A people - centred around Jesus. - Jesus ought to shape both who we are, but also and particularly how we respond to others in our polarised world.
- A people who will never be put to shame. Shame is a powerful thing in our current online world - used to control and silence people. In Christ we will never be put to shame.

+ A Rejection of Him

Whilst the world may reject Jesus, God builds his church anyway. The stone is pictured as being flung aside and deemed unsuitable but God, as a master-builder, quietly comes and picks it up and then designs the whole building around it.

We then noted our new transformative identity (v9-10) which leads to a new lifestyle. At the heart of much of the anger, tribalism and polarisation we see online seems to be a confusion regarding our identity now. If who we are is tied up with our tribe or the way that others perceive or understand us, so anger and confusion will easily arise if that identity is challenged. It's vital that we understand who we now are in Christ. Peter can then (v10-11) go on and encourage his readers to live differently and attractively with eternal consequences.

Lots more we could have said about this topic, but here are a few questions to start your group off...

- *have you experienced that tribalism, polarisation or anger at all recently?*
- *we'll explore more on this next week, but where do you think people locate their identity nowadays? How does this lead to anger against others?*
- *how do you think our online culture exacerbates and feeds these things?*
- *Peter explains to us that some polarisation is to be expected as people respond to Jesus in very different ways. How do you feel about that?*
- *How does Peter describe the role of Jesus in building his people? Why a temple? What does he say about his people? How does this description help us as we think about responding to tribalism?*
- *Do you agree that identity is a key thing in this tribalism? How does Peter describe God's people in v9-10? How does this description change how we ought to treat others?*
- *What's Peter's vision for v10-11? How are God's people to live? With what outcome?*
- *What 1 thing can you take away for this week?*