

Book Review by John Littleton 14/11/2020

Strawbridge, Jennifer. Ed. 2020. *The First Letter of Peter: A Global Commentary*. London: SCM Press. Kindle edition, \$14.92

“God’s church for God’s world: walking, listening and witnessing together” is the theme set for the 2022 Lambeth Conference to be held in England during the northern hemisphere summer. The biblical focus for the Conference will be *1 Peter*. A Lambeth Conference book *The First Letter of Peter: A Global Commentary* is the subject of this review.

Practical wisdom, deep spiritual insights and clear explanations of difficult passages are generously shared in this international biblical commentary. The Commentary has a conversational style and is the product of collaborative efforts by thirty-five contributors who participated in dialogue and prayer together twice, in seminars November 2018 and May 2019. Contributors represent a range of Christian traditions from across the worldwide Anglican Communion. The commentary is edited by Jennifer Strawbridge, Associate Professor in New Testament Studies at the University of Oxford. Robyn Whitaker, Senior Lecturer in New Testament at The University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia is one of the contributors.

The Commentary speaks to the diverse contexts of the Anglican Church across six continents and invites readers to reflect theologically on their contexts as members of the People of God. Theological reflection is at the heart of this Commentary. Readers are invited to think and pray about their present life situations in light of the biblical account, and then move forward, renewed for future action. Eight challenges for the church today emerged from the seminars and are presented to inform prayer and conversation about 1 Peter (Loc 176).

The Commentary is part of the preparatory material for the Lambeth Conference. First impressions suggest that the Commentary is meant for serious readers of books and those who wish “to engage in deeper biblical study of 1 Peter” (Loc 194). However, a second look reveals that the study is made more accessible by the inclusion, in each of the five chapters, of visuals, the biblical text, the commentary, excursus sections (further information and explanation), ending with questions to consider as individuals or groups.

The apostolic author of *The First Letter of Peter*, in the last quarter of the first century AD/CE, wrote to God’s people, “Christians living in diaspora” (1 Pet. 1.1-2, 2.9-10; Strawbridge 2020 Loc 299, Loc 1452). Peter encouraged them to be People of hope in their following of Christ even as they suffered for being Christian within their communities in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. They experienced, as Christ did, hostility, rejection and alienation. The Commentary states “We have to remember I Peter’s context as a letter written to a small group of Christians who are a minority in their culture and who live in an empire that is hostile to them, fearful of their beliefs, worship other gods and view Christians with suspicion” (Strawbridge 2020, Loc 1388).

The ethical sections in the Letter help members of the Christian community navigate relationships with the Roman State, guide slaves in how to relate to their masters in an era of slavery, and wives and husbands in how to relate to one another as followers of Christ in an age of patriarchy (Strawbridge 2020, Loc 819-963).

The letter is about Christian identity as God's People. It is addressed to "all of you" (5.5) and "all of you who are in Christ" (5.14). It is a single calling. "You are... God's own people" (2.9). The elders, men and women, are members of the people of God and are to serve the community like lowly shepherds; Christ being the chief Shepherd. All members, together, are encouraged to be resilient, to have genuine mutual love, to do good, be hospitable, especially to strangers, live in a counter cultural way and survive so that they are ready always to share their faith in Christ by example and by speaking to anyone with "gentleness and reverence" (3.13-16); and to resist evil.

They are all encouraged in Christ to be humble, alert, disciplined and to "stand fast" in the grace of God. The People of God "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received" (4.10). Relying on the grace of God is a key theme (1.2, 1.10, 1.13, 4.10, 5.10, 5.12). Christian people are invited to rest into God's grace during difficulties and times of suffering. The God of all grace who has called them all in Christ will "restore, support, strengthen and establish you" (5.10).

The Commentary attends to the matter of leadership and ministry mentioned in Chapter Five of the Letter. It notes "that this letter was written before the solidifying of ministry into a three-fold order of bishop, presbyter and deacon" (Strawbridge 2020 Loc 1715). The elders are to exercise oversight within the people of God willingly and eagerly, not for status or greed, nor by compulsion, but, imitating Christ, with care and for service like a shepherd, "keeping the flock together and protecting them so they flourish in the pasture" (Strawbridge 2020, Loc1737).

The Letter emphasises that all members of the People of God are called and have a ministry of service, individually and together (4.10, 5.1-4). It challenges them, to quote Archbishop Welby in the Foreword, "to live and to lead in a way that shows others that they are God's people, under the authority of Scripture, faithful to Christ and inspired by the Spirit" (Strawbridge 2020 Loc 109).

Through their study bishops will have the opportunity to explore and discuss the theology and practice of the church as the People of God. Then, on returning home share the fruit of their conversations with others for the benefit of their part of the Anglican Communion. As a call to action by the whole People of God journeying towards Lambeth Conference, dioceses might be invited to study *1 Peter* in conjunction with the Commentary before the conference begins. Then bishops could take a combined reflection with them, the result of collaborative efforts in each diocese. *1 Peter* calls us to be inclusive, involve all disciples and practise gentle guidance.

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