

SERMON – 11/2/24
'Godly Suffering'

1 Peter 2:18-25

“When they hurled their insults at Christ, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:23)

Last Sunday we were thinking about the paradox that to experience true freedom we must become slaves of God, yielding to the lordship of Christ and allowing Him to direct our lives as we seek to live distinctively for Him in the world. This morning we find Peter in his letter developing that same theme in a way that perhaps seems a little alien to us (because it is addressed to those who in the context of the Roman Empire were literally slaves). So let me begin by outlining what that context was and how it might compare with the situation in which we find ourselves 20 centuries later.

It is important to say right at the outset that Peter is certainly not condoning the practice of slavery but that he is speaking into a situation in the Roman Empire in which slavery was the reality of life for perhaps as many as a third of the population. In the early years of the Christian era it was amongst slaves that Christianity spread most rapidly, and because this faith was regarded with suspicion amongst those who were further up the pecking order, it was important that slaves who came to faith should be carefully taught how to live as Christian believers so that the accusation could not be levelled that Christianity was merely a revolutionary sect that was bent on upsetting the political and economic order of things. Christianity *does* bring dramatic changes in society wherever it spreads but it does so by bringing transformation to individuals in society much more successfully than by trying to promote structural change. The apostle *Paul* too addresses slaves in his letters, although he also offers teaching to Christians who are slave-owners, outlining how they too are called to distinctive and holy living in that role.

And we can take New Testament teaching addressed to slaves and masters and learn much that holds true in the context of

today's workplace environment and indeed in any situation where one person is under the authority of another or in a position where they are responsible for directing others, even if that is in a volunteer situation like in a church congregation.

It is significant that Peter begins with the example of Jesus Christ Himself and that's where we absolutely need to begin here this morning.

"Because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example," Peter writes, "You should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.' For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." (1 Peter 2:21-25)

What has Christ done? Peter makes a list as He reflects on Isaiah ch.53. He suffered for us, He committed no sin, no deceit was found in His mouth; when insults were hurled at Him He did not retaliate; when He suffered He made no threats, instead He entrusted Himself to God and bore our sins in His body on the Cross, healing us by His wounds. What a brief but comprehensive summary Peter gives of the saving work of Christ – the essence of the message is simple: Jesus lived a perfect human life and submitted to unjust suffering, and through Him a great transaction is accomplished, that by *His* self-giving we who are guilty of sin might be saved from the judgement that we ought rightfully to receive. And the challenge that Peter lays before us is to acknowledge in the light of Jesus' self-giving for us that we cannot just carry on the way we always have as human beings. If Christ suffered for you, Peter says, you should follow in his steps. So what does that look like for us?

Firstly it means taking the step of faith that is involved in accepting that what Christ did He did for *you* - He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, say Peter here. (v.24) So let me put you on the spot this morning and ask if you have taken that step of

faith? Have you been crucified with Christ and entered in to the great transaction with Him, giving your life for Him as He has given His life for you? Have you acknowledged your guilt and received the free gift of His forgiveness? For there is where the perfect freedom we were speaking about last week is to be found.

And secondly, following in Christ's steps means living out the new life of faith in the everyday things of life, committing yourself to living without sin and without deceit in our mouths. Now, of ourselves, we are incapable of actually accomplishing that - our human nature is sinful and though we have been given a new birth our old humanity is still right there crouching at the door - so we need to be very consciously seeking to put to death all that belongs to the sinful nature and letting the Holy Spirit make us more and more like Jesus every day. There is a balance to be struck between celebrating that in Christ we are ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, and that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and the need to commit ourselves to the task of letting that be the reality of our daily living. There is nothing that tarnishes the witness of Christians more than sin and deceit - when we fail to walk the talk we are hypocrites and these are the things that people around us really notice and remember and hold against us and against any who seek to proclaim the Gospel. Peter says of Jesus: "He committed no sin and no deceit was found in His mouth." And Peter says to us: "To this you were called... that you should follow in his steps." (v.21)

Perhaps you feel that you have let Christ down in that regard, like Peter himself had done so spectacularly on the night of Jesus' arrest. Well, Peter here calls us to return (as he had done himself) to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. Christ is the Good Shepherd who searches high and low for the sheep that went astray and He is longing for each and every one of us to return to Him today. Just like the shepherd who finds the lost she and the woman who finds the lost coin and the father to whom the lost son comes back there is welcome and rejoicing in highest heaven whenever that victory is won and whenever forgiveness is accepted. It's never too late to receive that gracious pardon of God, but don't delay a moment longer because, to return to where we started and Peter's teaching for Christians who were

slaves, we have lives to live day by day for the glory of God and the honour of God's Son.

The Gospel is not just for church on Sunday it's for wherever you spend your days, at work, at home, with family and friends, at leisure or as a volunteer, and Peter's words in today's reading apply to us wherever we seek to bear witness to our Christian faith before we ever open our mouths.

If you are in a situation where you are working or volunteering under a boss or a manager or a team leader, your calling as a Christian is to submit to their authority, not grudgingly or with ill-grace but, Peter says, 'with all respect'. Of course it is easy to respect someone who naturally commands respect or who is considerate towards you. But what if the person in charge is harsh or unreasonable or unlikeable? Well that is when the Christian believer is particularly called to be distinctive. The average person in those circumstances will only show as much respect as they have to in order to keep their job, but as Christians we are called to go the second mile and to give respect even where it is not due. That is a really powerful witness not only to the person who is in authority over you but also to those who are under their authority with you. This was one of the main reasons why Christianity spread so rapidly among slaves in the Roman Empire and through slaves to their masters. Everyone could see that Christians were different and it spoke volumes about the kind of transformation that Christ can bring.

So should we just roll over meekly when we are treated unjustly or bullied by those who have power over us? Unlike in Roman times where beatings and physical abuse could be dished out with impunity by slave-owners there ought to be a better environment in our allegedly more civilised society, although verbal and emotional abuse and the kind of injustices that we have seen recently in the Post Office scandal are still perpetrated. What Peter says is that none of us should be in a position as Christians to be disciplined because our behaviour should be above reproach and that if we *do* face injustice we can stand tall in the knowledge that there is One who judges justly, the One before whom our persecutors must stand at the last day. Just as Christ was vindicated so also will those be who walk in His steps.

If anyone here or anyone you know is facing unjust suffering or harsh treatment whether in the workplace or at home or in a group you belong to let me urge you to share your experiences with a trusted advocate who can walk with you and pray with you to find a just solution. The world's way is to fight back but Christ shows us a different way.

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