

SERMON – 18/2/24

'Reverence without Fear'

Introduction to Bible Reading - Alan Reid

I want to preface our Bible reading this morning by a few explanatory remarks. Some of you I know have read this morning's passage in advance and are interested to know what I will have to say about it in the sermon. Some of you would probably rather we simply passed over this section but, as someone who takes the Bible seriously and who has always sought to grapple with the whole of the Scriptures, I don't believe it is for us to pick and choose what we accept and what we dismiss. God's Word challenges all of us in different ways and above all when we hear the Scriptures read we should be open to what it is that God may be saying into our particular context. Listen for God's Word to you today.

A couple of things to say by way of introduction. Firstly, when we read the Bible we need to be mindful of the context into which a particular section was first written – as we saw last week in a passage that addressed Christians who were slaves in the Roman Empire, there are things for us to learn today even though we accept the consistent biblical message that no human being should be the slave of another. Two thousand years ago it was almost universally believed that men were somehow superior to women. Such attitudes have been evident a lot more recently than that, and persist today in some places around the world. I want to be very clear that the Bible teaches that men and women have precisely the same inheritance in Christ. Equally I think there are aspects of what our culture has to say about gender that need to be challenged in our own time. Again, I say let's listen for what God may be saying to each of us this morning.

The passage is only a few verses long and I am going to read it twice in two different translations – firstly the New International Version and then the Message translation so that we might be open to different things that may strike us.

In the previous verses, Peter has been exploring what it means to live a godly life in a pagan society and what it means specifically for those who wanted to know how a Christian who was a slave should live their life.

Reading: 1 Peter 3:1-7 – Alan Reid

“Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” (NIV)

“The same goes for you wives: Be good wives to your husbands, responsive to their needs. There are husbands who, indifferent as they are to any words about God, will be captivated by your life of holy beauty. What matters is not your outer appearance—the styling of your hair, the jewellery you wear, the cut of your clothes—but your inner disposition. Cultivate inner beauty, the gentle, gracious kind that God delights in. The holy women of old were beautiful before God that way, and were good, loyal wives to their husbands. Sarah, for instance, taking care of Abraham, would address him as “my dear husband.” You’ll be true daughters of Sarah if you do the same, unanxious and unintimidated. The same goes for you husbands: Be good husbands to your wives. Honour them, delight in them. As women they lack some of your advantages. But in the new life of God’s grace, you’re equals. Treat your wives, then, as equals so your prayers don’t run aground.” (The Message)

Sermon

So which verse would you like me to take as our starting point this morning? Is it to be 'Wives, submit to your own husbands' or is it to be 'Husbands, honour your wives'? Would you like a sermon on the text: 'Your beauty should not come from

outward adornment' ? Actually, if any one verse was to commend itself to me this morning it would be 'Husbands, treat your wives as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers' – and I will say something about that as I hope I will touch on these other verses too, but perhaps it's important that we take a bit of a step back and look at the whole passage alongside others like it and consider how we are to grapple with sections of the Bible that we find challenging or even disturbing.

John Calvin, the 16th century reformer and theologian regarded the task of the minister not simply to preach and teach the Scriptures from the pulpit Sunday by Sunday or to become the one to whom people turned for answers to difficult questions but to give the congregation the tools to read and learn for themselves from the Scriptures by helping them to understand the framework in which God's Word can be interpreted by all in their own particular circumstances.

There is a pithy aphorism that goes as follows: "A text without a context is a pretext for a subtext." I'm not sure who said it but I certainly see its outworking often enough. People will often pluck a verse from the Bible and quote it quite even quite accurately while getting entirely the wrong end of the stick because it is taken literally or taken out of context. My favourite example is when people knowingly say Ah well, 'The sun shines on the righteous' to suggest that if you live a good life Providence will smile on you, whilst conveniently missing the point of what Jesus actually says, 'He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous' (Matt.5:45) - meaning that in reality God is good and gracious to people whether or not they do good or evil, and that bad things happen to good people just as much as they do to rogues and scoundrels.

To take another example, people will humorously quote a verse from the Old Testament prohibiting the eating of certain foods or the mixing of animal and plant-based materials without *either* setting it in the context in which it was written (where God's people were being called to stand out from their pagan neighbours), *or* mentioning that these prohibitions were abolished in the New Testament and for a whole lot of reasons do not apply to Christians. These verses in Leviticus are part of

God's Word but they need to be interpreted in the light of the whole. Context is everything.

When it comes to reading from the New Testament letters we also have to read them in the context in which they were written and seek to discern both how God's Word challenged the culture of the day and also how it brings equal if different challenges to our 21st century western preconceptions, which we also have to acknowledge may be just as wayward as those of our forebears.

I said last week that teaching given by the apostles about Christian living in the first century had to be addressed into the context of the Roman Empire where slavery was a cornerstone of the whole social structure, or else Christianity would have been regarded merely as a political movement bent on upsetting the status quo. Of course it *did* overturn the status quo but it did so not by encouraging slaves to rise up against their masters but by exhorting them to live such good lives that, in the words of Jesus, people would see their good deeds and glorify their Father in heaven.

If slavery was a fact of life for perhaps as many as a third of the population across the Roman Empire, then the oppression of women generally and wives in particular has been almost universal throughout history and continues to be a matter that is extremely resistant to Kingdom values even in our day.

Subtly, Jesus Himself changed the narrative by giving an unheard-of place to women in his closest circle and giving to women perhaps the most revolutionary responsibility as the first witnesses of the resurrection in a society where women's testimony was formally discounted by law. And for all that the writings of the apostles in the New Testament sometimes appear to us to be misogynistic, again they offer a subtle yet extremely important challenge to the expectations of their time.

When Paul in his letter to the Ephesians calls Christian wives to submit to their husbands it is immediately after he has exhorted all Christians to 'submit to one another out of reverence to Christ' (Eph 5:21) men to women as much as women to men. Peter here very specifically calls Christian wives to submit to their *own* husband (v.1) as if to distinguish it from a more general and widespread submission of women to men. And he makes it clear that he has in mind a situation where a Christian

woman is married to a man who is not a believer and whose lifestyle may be the means of pointing her husband to Christ.

While Peter's exhortation to men to treat their wife with respect rather patronisingly to our ears describes them as 'the weaker partner,' (v.7) if we hear that as a round rebuke to any man who thinks it's OK to throw their weight around (as has been too often regarded as the way of the world) rather than as a dismissal of the greater strengths that women have over men, then I think we must hear this teaching with a rather different accent.

Just as the first apostles in their context could not be seen to rock the status quo in regard to the relationship between slaves and masters so would they have been comprehensively dismissed by society if they had advocated equality of the sexes in ways that to our shame even twenty centuries on are not universally accepted. But we need to hear the trumpet call of God's Word that sounds even through what may seem to us very modest or even underwhelming. From the very opening page of the Bible God's Word declares that women and men are both made in the image of God; the apostle Paul proclaims to the Galatians that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female' for 'we are all children of God through faith' (Gal. 3:26-28) and here Peter reminds husbands that their wives are 'heirs with them of the gracious gift of life' (v.7) – and that is a truly revolutionary statement in its context because it is being said in a society where women could simply not be heirs of anything because inheritance rights belonged only to men.

So far from apologising for bringing you a passage like this morning's reading I hope I have been able to give you some insight into the context in which it was first written and how differently it would have sounded to wives and husbands then compared to now. But neither do I want to apologise for laying the challenges of these verses before you in our very different context because I believe we need to have our preconceptions shaken just as much as the people of Peter's time, so as we close let me throw a few spiritual hand-grenades into the mix this morning. I hope that we can continue the discussion over coffee after the service and that you who are husbands and wives will take a bit longer to chew them over together in the

coming week. What will it mean practically for you to honour and respect and submit to one another?

Our calling as Christians is not to conform to the world's ways but to be transformed in Christ and to live differently from the pattern we see in society around us (whether in the first or the twenty-first century). Hear the Word of God.

As Paul says to the Ephesians, all of you 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Eph.5:21) – that's a challenge to all of us as we seek to work out what it means to live out our faith day by day amongst friends and family, as wives and husbands, parents and children, and particularly as we seek by our lifestyle as much as by our words to encourage those who are not yet believers to find life in its fulness in Christ. Hear the Word of God. It is never for anyone else, husband or otherwise, to insist that you submit to them – that is your gift alone to give and if it is not given freely and willingly it is a parody of what the apostles teach. If anyone here ever find themselves in an abusive situation, don't hesitate to speak to me about it and you will receive whatever support you need. Hear the Word of God.

One of the big juggernauts in our society today is the pressure on people to conform to a certain worldview that is portrayed as being neutral but which paradoxically often constrains individuality and pressurises people to adopt patterns of behaviour, even a whole lifestyle, that may cause them deep and lasting harm.

For example equality does not necessary mean uniformity. In Christ, women and men have absolutely equal status as children of God, but they have distinctive roles and gifts that do not require women to feel they have to be exactly the same as men or men to feel they should act the same as women. In Christ people do not need to be defined by their gender or their sexuality, by the colour of their skin or their eyes or their hair, by their personality or their accent or their sense of humour, by the way they use their gifts or talents. We each are who we are as precious individuals, eternally known and infinitely loved by God, tragically tainted by our sin but wonderfully redeemed by Christ and set free to fulfil our unique calling in the world. Hear me well, my friends – this is the Word of God – whoever you are and

whatever you may feel under pressure to be, know that you belong to God and rejoice.

As Peter says here, what makes you beautiful is what is evident in 'your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight' (v.4) – there's a verse that bears some pondering. Don't let the pressure the world puts on you to have a certain body type, to wear certain clothes, to style your hair a certain way, ever diminish who you are in Christ. Hear the Word of God.

Let's celebrate that husbands and wives are gloriously different and let each wife and husband take time together under God to work out consciously how their relationship can be developed for the glory of God, for the thriving of each and so that as Peter writes here 'nothing will hinder your prayers.' (v.7) Hear the Word of God.

I've no doubt that some of you will have felt your hackles rising in what I have spoken about today. If I have expressed things at all clumsily today, my prayer is that you will hear God's voice through it or despite it. Please talk to me about it afterwards and whatever doubts or questions may have risen in your mind, let the Word of God that the choir sang this morning take hold in your heart: "God so loved the world, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoso believeth in Him should not perish, should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)