

Reflection for Holy Week & Easter 2020

Readings: Jeremiah 2:10-13; Mark 14: 66-72; **1Peter 5:1-11**

Shepherd the Flock of God

5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight,^[a] not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;^[b] not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Simon Peter: Witness to the Resurrection.

Introduction

As the years pass, I become more keenly aware of the enduring influence of events that occurred in my formative years. Wordsworth famously wrote in 1806 “*the child is father to the man*”. Reading of Peter’s letters in the New Testament reveals how deeply Peter continued to be influenced throughout his life by his experiences in the first Holy Week and Easter. He learnt so much from his relationship with Jesus and especially from his own failure and subsequent restoration.

Most Christians are familiar with the stories in the gospels which link Peter to the Passion of Jesus. In Mark 8 Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, but impulsively also protested when Jesus foretold His Passion. In Mark 14 Jesus predicts Peter’s denial: “*Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times*”. Brash as ever, Peter declares, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” After the time in the garden when Peter failed to stay

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awake to pray with Jesus (Mark 14:37), for all his brave words it only took a servant girl to challenge Peter in the High Priest's courtyard for him to lose his courage and deny knowing Jesus.

My own life dramatically changed when, at the age of 13, I attended a Billy Graham rally, by closed circuit TV shown at Southampton Guild Hall, and had an experience I believe to be of the Spirit of Jesus. That formative experience, one of several key steppingstones on my pilgrimage of faith, was influential in later decisions that set the course of my life and ministry. We all have our own story to tell (and we are encouraged to tell one another our stories) even though we have never been physically with Jesus. For Peter, who spent time with Jesus as a disciple, his experiences changed him deeply and irrevocably.

Consider the years that Peter spent with Jesus, seeing Jesus heal the sick, still the storm and even walk on water. Peter tried to defend Jesus at His arrest. Imagine how crushed and devastated by guilt Peter was after his denial. What a deep lesson for him when the Good Shepherd rehabilitated him! "Do you love me Peter? Feed my sheep, feed my lambs" (John 21).

What about Peter's later life? It wasn't without controversy as we read in Paul's letter to the Galatians, which reveals how the apostles crossed theological swords. Yet he remained faithful to Christ right until, according to tradition, he died as a martyr in Nero's persecutions in AD64 in Rome. He had finally become a man of rock.

A. A SURVEY OF 1 PETER

I believe that it was just before his death that Peter wrote what we now call his first epistle. Some scholars doubt it, but I believe that he did in fact write the letter, and this is supported by tradition and textual evidence suggesting that Peter dictated the letter. We see clearly in 1 Peter the enduring and deepening influence on Peter's life and character of his experience of Jesus.

For example, the letter is shot through with echoes of Jesus' teaching. It answers the question, "*In the light of our baptism how should we live?*" It was written to Christians scattered in the 129,000 square miles of Asia Minor, where a rapidly growing church was being tested and was greatly troubled, living in the shadow of persecution. Peter is writing with comfort and encouragement as they suffer for their faith.

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Peter declares that as citizens of Heaven, it is a deeply spiritual experience to suffer with and for Christ. And so, as he writes to believers who have been baptised in water, he realises that they are poised on the brink of a baptism of fire. Surely, his experience of Christ and His sufferings must have something to say to the Christians of Asia Minor, and to us.

B. SIGNIFICANT REMINDERS OF CHRIST

I once read the story of a Free Church moderator who went to a Scout Camp for a service to be conducted by the Bishop. Out of respect the moderator went fully robed. After a very long time waiting in the summer sun, he became hot under the collar, and asked very loudly "*When is that bishop going to turn up?*" A man standing close to him in Scout shirt and shorts said, "I am already here!". At times, when confronted by terrible circumstance, we might be tempted to ask, "Where is God in all this?" The answer is often that He is already there, alongside us, suffering with us.

A professional sports coach was once encouraging a player and told him, "Pain don't hurt". He was wrong, of course. But pain can be like a magnet which draws us closer to Christ. As Paul wrote, "*We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed*" (2 Cor 4:6).

And so, we find in 1 Peter 5 at least four significant echoes of Peter's earlier life with Jesus.

1. Verse 1 "*I am a witness of Christ's resurrection*"

The sufferings of Christ made an indelible impression upon Peter. Christian art contains numberless depictions of the Passion. However, we are not called to be morbid, though it is good to be mindful. Every blessing we have as Christians is at Jesus' expense. In His suffering He won the greatest victory of all time.

2. Verse 5 "*You must all put on the apron of humility*"

Peter could never forget the event that is retold in John 13. He and his fellow disciples were too proud to wash each other's feet. But the Master took the towel, tied it around His waist as an apron and washed their feet, in the humble role of a servant. Peter never forgot Jesus words "*You then should wash one another's feet*" (John 13:14).

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3. Verse 8 “Be alert, be on the watch”

Peter takes us back to Gethsemane. He knows only too well how the devil roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. And just as some of us can remember mistakes we made a long time ago as if it were yesterday, so 30 years had not blunted Peter’s memory of Gethsemane, where he failed to watch and pray with Jesus for an hour. With the benefit of hindsight, we can explain so many of the mistakes in life that we have made. Peter, looking back, could see in his failure to watch and pray the seeds of his disgrace, when he denied his Lord.

4. Verse 10 “The God of all grace ... will perfect you

Surely no Methodist can read these words and not recall John Wesley’s doctrine of perfect love. The optimism of grace that says we CAN be saved “to the uttermost” and which refuses to limit what God can do in us. The RSV puts it, “will restore you”. I am told that the Greek suggests, “will mend your broken nets”.

Peter knew a lot about mending broken nets, both as a Galilean fisherman and as a fisher of men., He knew for himself the unmerited love of God that forgives 70 times 7 times and then goes on forgiving. His optimism came out of his experience of the Good Shepherd. Peter had been painstakingly transformed into a rock. He knew no limit to what the God of grace can do for us.

CONCLUSION

When our children were tiny and started school, we used to ask them what they had enjoyed most and least each day and incorporate these things into a bedtime prayer. It was the opportunity to reflect on the events of the day and learn from them. Peter spent a lifetime reflecting on that first Holy Week and Easter. He learnt so much from it. Were we able to ask him to summarise for our benefit what he learnt perhaps he would tell us two things:

- a. You must never talk or read about Jesus without following His example. John 13: “*I have set an example for you so that you will do just what I have done for you*”.
- b. There is no failure you can ever make which is too big for the God of grace to restore you.

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It is said that King Arthur would greet his soldiers returning from battle without a scratch with the words, "*Go get your scars*". He wanted them to be men of valour who would plunge into the thick of battle.

Life today can produce many anxieties and emotional wounds – some of them self-inflicted. The King we serve does expect courage, but He is not a King who disregards our pain. Our Lord is also the Great Physician. If following Christ means going the way of the Cross, then we can be sure that the Great Physician is near. So, let us enrol in His service, and be blessed in receiving His healing grace.