

Scripture for Sunday 18th February

Text: 1 Peter 3:18-22 (NIV)

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Sermon: “He Descended to the Dead”

It is now Lent, so we leave Mark’s gospel for a while and follow the Lectionary readings to explore the theme of the cross from various New Testament letters. If you think about it for a moment, the *resurrection* of Jesus created a different kind of problem for first-century Christians. They may well have asked, “If Jesus was raised from the dead, then ‘What was the significance of his crucifixion?’” “Why did it happen at all?” “What does it all mean?” These are the kind of questions that are good to explore during Lent. And what the New Testament writers concluded was that *the crucifixion of Jesus was the most important event that has ever happened in history!*

What we will also discover is that the New Testament writers had *different* responses to the questions I just posed. As the Holy Spirit was illuminating and guiding the early church, various insights arose and in due course, what we would call “Creeds” became established. Some of their explanations and insights we struggle to understand today, because we don’t look at the world in the same way. Our difficult-to-understand reading today from 1st Peter is a case in point. One way to see aspects of this reading is as a kind of early Creed; indeed some scholars see verses 18 and 19 as words of a hymn. Let’s hear it again:

¹⁸ For Christ also *suffered* for sins *once for all*,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
in order to bring you to God.
He was put to death in the flesh,
but made alive in the spirit,
¹⁹ he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison . . .
Jesus Christ, ²² has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,
with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Now listen again to a few lines of the Apostle’s Creed, which we said last week:

he *suffered* under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father;
he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I hope you can better see what I mean about the passage being, in part, a terse summary of the Christian faith – including aspects that relate to the significance of the death of Jesus.

The author begins by saying that “*Christ suffered.*” The context into which the author writes is that of churches throughout modern-day Turkey suffering *for following Jesus Christ*. We all suffer in this world, in one form or another, but not all of our sufferings can be said to be because we are Christians. We may be mocked or dismissed for standing up for Christian values, yet in certain parts of the world today some are suffering dire hardship and being killed just for being a Christian. We must pray for them, and thank God that we are not in that situation. But since they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we must suffer with them and, where possible, help carry their burden. What this passage does *not* address though, is the general problem of suffering or evil, so please don’t think in those terms today. The point is that *Christ genuinely suffered; his pain and loss were real*. And because of the doctrine of Trinity, we can approach a God who intimately knows suffering. For those whose roads are paved with pain right now, whatever the cause, I encourage you reflect further on the experience of the *suffering Jesus* during this Lenten journey.

For us here today at the beginning of Lent, we are reminded of one more thing: that “Christ suffered *for us.*” As it says earlier in 1 Peter 2:21, “*Christ suffered for you.*” The broader Church has traditionally seen this 40-day period as a time to “fast” as a means of making us more aware of Christ’s physical suffering. Consequently, as Lent prepares us for Easter, some people give up certain things - such as chocolate! (Good luck to that on Valentine’s Day!) While this “fasting” can be viewed as a form of voluntarily “suffering,” I hope we will also be prepared to look deeper into the more profound meanings and cost of the cross. There is nothing wrong in *giving up* things for Lent, but I suggest an alternative is to *take up* something new. Why not *take up* some form of activity or cause as a “cross” and follow Jesus to the events of Jerusalem. I leave it up to you to think of creative possibilities!

The author goes on to say that Christ suffered “*once for all,*” a phrase that also appears in Paul’s letter to the Romans.¹ This is a *colossal* statement for a Jew to make in light of their long tradition of offering sacrifices to God in the Temple. Although the word sacrifice isn’t used here, as it is in the book of Hebrews, it *is* implied. As the early church wrestled with the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, they confidently concluded that it signified the *end* of the sacrificial system. No longer did they need to make annual pilgrimages to the Temple in order to restore their relationship with God. (Actually, since this letter is thought to have been written *after* the Temple had been destroyed in 70 AD, they couldn’t anyway!)

The writer of 1 Peter also states *why* Christ suffered: “*Christ suffered once for all in order to bring you to God.*” As Jews saw it, only the priests had the right to close access with God. In the Temple, ordinary worshipers could only come so far – whether that was to the Court of Gentiles, or the Court of Women, or the Court of the Israelites, but there they must stop. The people could *not* go into the Court of Priests, nearer to the presence of God. And of the priests, only the High Priest could enter

¹ Rom 6:10.

into the Holy of Holies. So when the writer of 1 Peter says: “*Christ suffered once for all in order to bring you to God,*” he means that somehow through the cross, Jesus opens the way for all men and women, Jews and non-Jews, to come near to God’s intimate and glorious presence. And this correlates with Matthew’s imagery of the Temple curtain being torn in two when Christ was crucified, indicating that people now had direct access to God.² There is a further Greek connection too. In the court of a King, there was an official who had the role of introducing, or giving access, to the ruler. It was his function to decide who should be permitted into the King’s presence, and who should be kept out. (Now it is a secretary who stops you from seeing the boss!) This person held the keys of access, as it were. So it is through Jesus Christ that we confidently have the right of access to God, or to receiving God’s grace.

To summarize this point: “Sin” is that which interrupts the relationship which *should* exist between God and all humanity. The object of the Temple sacrifices was to restore that lost relationship. The New Testament writers understood the death of Christ as somehow being the permanent means for restoring the lost relationship between God and human beings, and consequently we do not have to worry about any condemnation before God. That is Good News indeed, both then and now!

The writer then goes on to say: “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” This is symbolized in Christian baptism. That said, how the writer uses Noah’s flood to prefigure baptism requires some metaphorical athleticism! After all, Noah and his family were saved *from* water, we are saved *through* water. And even then the true saving power of baptism doesn’t come through the water itself, but through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascension to the right hand of God. So as we go under the waters of baptism, we symbolically “die” along with Christ, and as we emerge we are resurrected with him; we are a “new creation” in Christ – alive in the Spirit! Furthermore, baptism is a symbol of covenant; it communicates to believers a sense of “belonging to God.” We are making our way, by the continuing grace of God, safely through the destructive floods that are ravaging the present age and that oppose God’s values. Consequently, the writer wants those suffering for their faith to continue to do good, and to live in the firm hope of the promised resurrection, so graphically symbolized in baptism.

OK, so far so good, but then he adds “Jesus went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison . . . to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.” What on earth does he mean? And at this point scholars have a number of complex views. What we do know is that all those people in the Noah story were killed in the great flood. And so perhaps the most straightforward way to look at this is to follow the line in the apostles Creed, which says: “he descended to the dead.” Indeed, 1 Peter 4:6 says, “the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead.”³ This alludes to Jesus descending to the shadowy place of the dead – Sheol, or the Greek Hades - in order to liberate them, as well as the whole of humankind. The Jews did not think in terms

² Matt 27:50-51.

³ See also Eph 4:8-10.

of heaven and hell, but of a shadowy world where spirits of men and women moved like gray ghosts in everlasting twilight and where there was neither joy, nor strength. The dead were separated from life and light and, most certainly, from God. Apparently Jesus was proclaiming the gospel to the “spirits in prison” on the first Easter Saturday! The writer of 1 Peter understood that those *already dead* could *also* experience God’s grace and be rescued from the power of death. In other words, the death of Jesus has implications for *everyone* who ever lived, including those who had died before Jesus was crucified. And incidentally, it also means that they understood Christ’s death was no pretense – he *really* died on Good Friday!

Since Jesus “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,” not only is this exultation complete vindication over all that placed Jesus on the cross, but Jesus has complete triumph over all the “authorities and powers” that put him there. Christ the sufferer has become Christ the Victor. That is a stunning claim and went against the day-to-day experience of the recipients of this letter. But this is what the author wanted people to hang on to in the suffering they were experiencing. This message is echoed in another ancient hymn that Paul quotes in Philippians 2: “Therefore God also highly exalted him – that is Jesus - and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth *and under the earth* – or the place of the dead, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁴

In conclusion, this difficult and challenging passage raises three important theological issues: First, just as darkness abhors light, suffering is to be expected in the Christian life. Second, on Easter Saturday, Jesus liberated those imprisoned in the Godless underworld. And third, through the symbolism associated with the waters of baptism, we too are rescued - as was Noah.

Finally, this writer asks - and answers - is the following: “If God is truly Love, is there a limit to which God will *not* go to save?” The answer is simple: “Apparently not, since Jesus rescues even in the ultimate Godless place of the dead.” ***There is important practical application, here. It indicates that there is absolutely nowhere in our worlds, in our past, present, or even future, where we cannot be rescued by the grace of God, if we genuinely seek his forgiveness through Jesus Christ.*** Whatever else you take from this sermon, take that message into your very spirit. And remember: Christ also suffered for sins once for all in order to bring you and me to God. Amen.

⁴ Phil 2:9-11.