

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 17th 2020

I Peter 3:8-16 (New Testament for Everyone)

⁸ The aim of this is for you all to be like-minded, sympathetic and loving to one another, tender-hearted and humble. ⁹ Don't repay evil for evil, or slander for slander, but rather say a blessing. This is what you were called to, so that you may inherit a blessing.

¹⁰ For the one who wants to love life and see good days should guard the tongue from evil, and the lips from speaking deceit;

¹¹ should turn away from evil and do good; should seek peace, and follow after it.

¹² For the Lord's eyes are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.¹

¹³ Who is there, then, to harm you if you are eager to do what is right? ¹⁴ But if you do suffer because of your righteous behaviour, God's blessing is upon you! 'Don't fear what they fear; don't be disturbed.'² ¹⁵ Sanctify the Messiah as Lord in your hearts, and always be ready to make a reply to anyone who asks you to explain the hope that is in you. ¹⁶ Do it, though, with gentleness and respect. Hold on to a good conscience, so that when people revile your good behaviour in the Messiah they may be ashamed.

John 14:15-21 (New Testament for Everyone)

[Jesus said:] ¹⁵ 'If you love me,' he went on, 'you will keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the father, and he will give you another helper, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This other helper is the spirit of truth. The world can't receive him, because it doesn't see him or know him. But you know him, because he lives with you, and will be in you.

¹⁸ 'I'm not going to leave you bereft. I am coming to you. ¹⁹ Not long from now, the world won't see me any more; but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my father, and you in me, and I in you.

²¹ 'Anyone who has my commandments and keeps them – that's the person who loves me. Anyone who loves me will be loved by my father, and I will love them and show myself to them.'

¹ Ps 34:12-16.

² Isa 8:12.

Sermon: Turn Away from Evil, Do Good; Seek Peace, and Follow After It

As we have been hearing these last few weeks, the letter of 1 Peter is a combination of affirmation and exhortation. Last week I spoke on the aspect of *affirmation*; we are *living* stones, part of the spiritual house – a living community - that God is building, with Christ as the cornerstone.³ That's *who* we are, so even if we experience rejection and humiliation for following Jesus, we are *highly* valued by God. He considers us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own who have experienced his grace.⁴ That being the case, the writer goes on to proclaim we are to *live* in this new identity.

Today's reading is a summary of his *exhortations* on what that means practically. He has already said they are called to lives of holiness,⁵ obedience, sincerity, and mutual love.⁶ In light of that, he tells them "to rid themselves of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind."⁷ And instead he encourages them to be "like-minded, sympathetic, compassionate and humble."⁸ That's *how* relationships *within* the church are to be! Those contrasting images paint quite a picture of those churches, from groups of family units, together with slaves and, possibly, their masters, who all seem to be struggling to get along together. Let's *not* idolise the internal workings of the early church!⁹ That friction in young churches is, after all, why such encouragement was needed. This realism gives hope for *all* churches today.

These exhortations are not just for the harmonious relationships *within* the church, but sets up our behaviour with those *outside* the church too. He says: "Do not return evil for evil, or insult for insult, but instead bless others because you were called to inherit a blessing."¹⁰ When we hear those words, we hear a direct echo of the teaching of Jesus.¹¹ Yet we all know how hard it is to put this into practice. When we're criticized, we are sorely tempted to 'give-as-good-as-we-get' and retaliate in kind; in which case, we are no longer distinctive because we are behaving just like everyone else. We're *not* helping the situation and we're *not* behaving like salt and light in the wider community.¹² His rationale for his exhortation is a direct quote from Psalm 34: "For the one who wants to love life and see good days should guard the tongue from evil, and the lips from speaking deceit." The *tongue* is powerful for what we say can *bless* others, as well as wound - or even *curse* - them. More than that, what comes *out* of our mouth comes from the *heart*; for better or for worse, it's a sign of our *true* nature.¹³ That connection

³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Living-Stones.pdf> .

⁴ See 1 Pet 2:9-10; see also Exod 19:5-6; Isa 43:21. This non-Jewish audience were now part of the people of God.

⁵ 1 Pet 1:15-16.

⁶ 1 Pet 1:22. See also 1 Pet 2:11,16-17.

⁷ 1 Pet 2:1.

⁸ 1 Pet 3:8.

⁹ Which is something we are often prone to do in light of Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35.

¹⁰ 1 Pet 3:9; note the *eschatological* blessing. (See also; Rom 12:17-21; 1 Cor 4:12 and [11].)

¹¹ Matt 5:10-12, 38-48; Luke 6:28-31, especially 6:28 - "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

¹² See Matt 5:13-16 - <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Be-The-Church.pdf> .

¹³ See Matt 15:18-20; see also James 3:1-12.

is why the psalmist goes on: “Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and follow after it.”¹⁴ These exhortations are very practical; just consider the verbs: *turn away* – or *repent*,¹⁵ *do*, *seek* and *follow*. The two instructions go together: “Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and follow after it.” Those words from the psalmist really summarise it all.¹⁶

That being the case, the writer proclaims: “Who is there, then, to harm you if you are eager to do what is right?”¹⁷ We interrupt and exclaim: “Really, come on!” But the writer knows it’s *not* that simple and the just *do* experience unjust suffering.¹⁸ So he adds: “But *if you do* suffer because of your *righteous* behaviour, God’s blessing is upon you! ‘Don’t fear what they fear; don’t be disturbed.’”¹⁹ What does this mean? First, “God’s blessing is upon you” is an echo of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 where Jesus says that the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted are all *blessed* in God’s new kingdom.²⁰ Yet we may still wonder, “How can we *know* God will bless us?” The writer responds: “Because Jesus also suffered unjustly and God raised him from the dead and has given him the place of highest honour.”²¹

It’s worth, pausing here for a deliberate digression. Is this text really advocating non-retaliation in the face of evil?²² For those Christians who have been abused or oppressed this message of non-retaliation has understandably a bad reputation. It might seem to us that this exhortation represents a means by

¹⁴ 1 Pet 3:11; Ps 34:14. It may be hard to find this *peace*, but we have to work for it so that it becomes a new habit.

¹⁵ Note, the Greek word for “repent” is *not* used here, but I sense a similar connotation.

¹⁶ The writer of 1 Peter also quotes the next verse of the psalm too: “For the Lord’s eyes are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (1 Pet 3:12; Ps 34:15-16. There is an allusion to Ps 34:8 in 1 Pet 2:3). This is a curious saying (see also Ps 66:16-20). Earlier, the writer of 1 Peter says that those in positions of authority are to honour their fellow Christians who don’t have such power, so that “nothing may hinder their prayers” (1 Pet 3:7b). This might seem a little strange, even harsh; the Psalmist implies that those who *don’t* live as God intends can’t *expect* God to attend to their prayers. This *doesn’t* mean that God *won’t* answer the prayers of those who habitually ignore God or have no intention of following his ways, but *if* God does respond, it is another sign of his grace. (This connection is also implied in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins, *for we also* forgive everyone who sins against us,” Luke 11:4; Matt 6:12. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Content-of-the-Lord%E2%80%99s-Prayer-Part-2.pdf>. Recall too that in 1 Peter, there is an eschatological emphasis on our salvation.) Regardless, the writer of 1 Peter’s point is that God *does hear* the prayers *of the faithful*, and the very next verse in Psalm 34 provides that reassurance - Ps 34:17-18: “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”¹⁶ See also Ps 34:19-22.

¹⁷ 1 Pet 3:13.

¹⁸ The possibility of unjust suffering is *not* ruled out. They are, however, warned against offences that deserve punishment in 1 Pet 4:15.

¹⁹ 1 Pet 3:14.

²⁰ Matt 5:3-12, especially v11-12 and Luke 6:20-26. This too has an eschatological ring to it, for the kingdom is both “now and not yet.” Moreover, there may be a connection with “Blessed” in 1 Pet 3:14 with “Whoever would love life and see good days” in 3:10 and Ps 34:12. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/As-Slaves-of-God-Live-as-Free-People.pdf> .

²¹ 1 Pet 3:18,22; especially 4:14.

²² Particularly as the call to endure suffering, rather than to return in kind, is set in the context of an eschatological promise (1 Pet 2:20).

which oppressors play on the piety of the oppressed and simply prolongs their sufferings.²³ However, in the context of 1 Peter, Christians are to suffer *only* if need be, and even then, this does *not* mean they are to suffer silently.²⁴ This is *not* a text to be applied to domestic violence, but for suffering for faithfully following Jesus. More generally, the Old Testament prophets were inspired to speak truth to power and often suffered for it. Christ himself becomes the prime example of this activity, of course.²⁵ Nevertheless, if you read the gospel accounts of his passion, you will see that he was by no means altogether passive.²⁶ Nonviolence is *not* nonresistance; we only have to think of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi in this regard. Yes, this is indeed an active and risky faith to which we are called.

Moving on, we are told: “Don’t fear what they fear; don’t be intimidated,” which is a quote from Isaiah 8.²⁷ And “Revere the Messiah as Lord in your hearts”²⁸ is the writer’s Christ-centered *reinterpretation* of the next verse in Isaiah which says, “The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy.”²⁹ To “not fear what they fear” means we’re *not* to honour the idols everyone else worships, instead we are to create space for in our lives for worship of Jesus Christ. Moreover, we’re “not to be intimidated by the things the world fears”³⁰ because Jesus is now Lord of all³¹ or, alternatively, *our* lives are in God’s hands. In this present pandemic and economic crisis, hold firm to that foundation.

So that being the case, if as a Christian community we are living in holiness, obedience, sincerity, and mutual love,³² and if we “turning away from evil and doing good; seeking peace and following after it,” people will notice our behaviour and actions and some may ask us about *why* we do what we do. At which point, the writer tells his readers, “*Always* be ready to make a reply to *anyone* who asks you to explain the hope³³ that is in you, doing so with gentleness and respect.”³⁴ First, remember this message is being given to those [“resident aliens”³⁵] who are marginalized and powerless within their communities. Yet even they have an opportunity to make a difference by the way their actions and lifestyle shine in the darkness. And when that is noticed, they are called to courteously give an account

²³ As usual, it’s easy for those of us who are relatively powerful in our society to urge non-retaliation on those who are relatively powerless.

²⁴ Christians are obviously *not* to abuse or slander others, but that does *not* mean they should take abuse or slander without speaking the word that might conflict, or even convince, those who are perpetuating such acts towards them. See also 1 Pet 3:15.17.

²⁵ Our participation, *if need be and not sought*, in the suffering of Christ is a key theme in 1 Peter, see 2:21-24; 3:18; 4:12-19.

²⁶ There is power in “weakness” and certain Gospels (e.g., John) present Jesus as “controlling” the events of the passion.

²⁷ Isa 8:12b. Curiously, in today’s COVID-19 context, Isa 8:12a says: “Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy”! However, this is likely a political conspiracy and *not* our contemporary “fake-news” conspiracy theories.

²⁸ 1 Pet 3:15a. “Revere” (NIV) is literally “sanctify” or “set apart” (NET, NTE, NRSV)

²⁹ Isa 8: 13a. In other words, the writer on 1 Peter interprets “LORD Almighty” *Christologically*. The word “lord” also means “master” and this may have added meaning to those who were slaves.

³⁰ 1 Pet 3:14b.

³¹ See 1 Pet 3:22.

³² See [5,6].

³³ “hope” is a key word in 1 Peter: see 1: 3, 13, 21; 3:5,15 (explicitly), and 1:8–9; 2:12; 4:13; 5:4,6,10 (implicitly).

³⁴ 1 Pet 3:15b-16a. This message is particularly relevant to marginalized and powerless.

³⁵ 1 Pet 1:1,17; 2:11.

for their behaviour. There two things that strike me about this exhortation for us today. First, evangelism *begins* by the church *living out* the gospel *in practice* to the point that people notice the *difference* Jesus has made in our lives. Second, I suspect many Christians wouldn't really know what to say if anyone asked them to explain their actions and their faith. Moreover, some people may be very proactive in talking about Jesus, but their general behaviour makes you wonder what real difference Jesus has made in their lives! *Both* aspects are important. Even so, although reasoned explanations can sometimes be helpful, what is key is our *example*. If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you! And if the judge asked you for the reason of the hope within you, what would you say?

Let me illustrate this with a true story. A minister went to his vestry and took off his robes before joining his congregation for coffee after the Sunday morning service. He noticed a visitor and so he went to greet him. After the usual pleasantries, he asked him what he thought of the service. The man must not have realised he was speaking to the minister because he said bluntly, "I didn't get much from the sermon." The minister, muttered his reply, "Never mind, I didn't get much from it either." But then the man grabbed his arm and pointed across the room and said, "What's that going on over there?" The minister looked and couldn't see anything unusual; "What do you mean?" he asked. The visitor said, "I don't understand how that scruffy, young, white man in the leather jacket can be embracing that elderly black lady and, look, there's such joy on their faces; explain that!?" Once the behaviour of Christians is sufficiently different from our culture, questions will naturally arise— and what will we say then?

Finally, he tells us to "hold on to a good conscience" in the face of humiliation and opposition.³⁶ At the end of the day, our *integrity* is all we have. That, together with living lives above reproach, is our best defense in a hostile environment.³⁷ It is vital that we maintain our inner moral compass.

On hearing all this you may sigh and say, "He's asking for the impossible!" That's a valid point. Two quick responses. First, we *can't* do it alone, we must do this *together*, for this witness is nothing less than the *communal* behaviour of the church - and it was to churches, not individuals, that this letter was written. Even Martin Luther King Jr. was not alone. Second, we *can't* do it alone, we need the Spirit of Christ within us. As we move from Easter toward Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, let's not forget that the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead³⁸ is also the One who gives *life* to the church. Our Gospel reading today reminds us of this promise.³⁹ Jesus exhorts his followers: "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth."⁴⁰ The extent that we invite God's Spirit into our lives, *and* into our church, will be the degree to which we can be effective in living out these exhortations.

³⁶ 1 Pet 3:16. The appeal to a good conscience to make sure that any (potential) charges brought against the Christians are for their goodness and *not* for any participation in evil. See also 1 Pet 4:12-19, especially v 15-16.

³⁷ That does not, of course, guarantee we won't face some kind of 'persecution,' but shame on them says 1 Pet 3:16b.

³⁸ Rom 8:11.

³⁹ One that perhaps is under-emphasized in 1 Peter.

⁴⁰ John 14:15-17a.

In conclusion, I said at the beginning, this letter contains affirmations and exhortations. We like the former, but are not too sure about the latter! Yes, we have a new identity,⁴¹ but the question is: are we prepared to live it out practically as a community of living stones? Are we prepared to “turn away from evil, do good, seek peace, and passionately follow after it? Are we prepared to live, as a faith community, in holiness, obedience, sincerity, and mutual love in such a way that others around notice and ask why? Are we prepared to reply to *anyone* who asks us to explain the hope that is within us with gentleness and respect? May our response to all these questions be, “Yes, the Spirit being our Helper.” Amen.

⁴¹ One that is affirmed in baptism.