

1 Peter 3:8-22 – Living in a Hostile world – Richard Condie St David's Cathedral – Sunday May 17, 2020

Cyprian was the Bishop of Carthage in North Africa from the year 249 until his death as a martyr in 258. During his term as Bishop he faced what one writer called: a “plateful of problems”¹. Internal conflicts in the church over theology, and the sinful behaviour of Christians. And external pressures of violence towards Christians and the widespread persecution of the Christian church. On top of all that, quite topically, a plague (possibly influenza) that saw a huge loss of life – 5,000 people a day in Rome at its height.

Cyprian wanted to call Christians to live out their faith in a way that was biblical and true. He believed that this meant LIVING the good news in such a way that others would see their lives and be attracted to the faith. He wrote a treatise that in part said this:

“Beloved brethren, we are philosophers not in words but in deeds; we exhibit our wisdom not by our dress, but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them; we do not speak great things, but we live them.”²

This quote comes from a book called “The Patient Ferment: the improbable rise of the Christianity in the Roman Empire”. The book tells the story of how the church by persistently and patiently living out the truths of their faith, won over the Roman empire to Christianity.

In some ways the story could be a commentary on 1 Peter. Remember that our letter of 1 Peter is written to the church in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, at a time when it was not easy to be a Christian. They were suffering “trials of many kinds” (chapter 1). Chapter 4 will speak of “the fiery ordeal” that was to come. And is writing to teach them how to live authentic Christian lives in the middle of this.

Our passage this morning continues where we began last week, of how the Christian is to live as an alien and exile in the world, and now especially in world where there is suffering, evil and abuse. There is much to say about this, but I want to confine myself today to three observations and a grounding. It would be great if you had your bible handy and open to 1 Peter Chapter 3.

The first observation is about

1. Living Good Lives vv 8-9

It is summed up in verses 8-9 “⁸ Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.

¹ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 13

² Kreider, 13

I suspect in these two verses he is describing our behaviour inside the church and outside the church. Inside, four adjectives cluster around a central idea of love, literally “brotherly love”. Love for one another is the centre of Christian community and that is attended on one side by unity and sympathy, and on the other by tender-heartedness and humility.

When we see the Christian church really living this brotherly and sisterly affection out – showing unity and sympathy and soft-hearted humility, it is a truly wonderful thing.

In recent days Helen and I have received so many instances of this. Care parcels arriving at our door, phone calls from long distant friends, unified prayer supporting us and other believers and great love. I hope you have felt and given some of that yourself in recent days. These are the marks of the alien and exiled life of believers as they live with one another.

And it is how Christians live in the world, that he turns to in next breath. “Do not repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing.” As Christians live in a hostile world, that is often against Christianity, shunning retaliation and embracing blessing is our distinctive life.

Of course, this is not new to Peter. Our Lord Jesus said “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Historian, Rodney Stark makes the statement: “The Fundamental problem of every religion is one of creditability”. How one’s faith is actually lived; whether it works or not to change our lives and attitudes; is the true litmus test of faith. Does it make a difference?

And Peter is here saying, “yes it does”. He quotes Psalm 34 as the model in vv 10 and 11.

“Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹ let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.

His point is similar to the one made by Cyprian of Carthage – “we are philosophers not of words but of deeds, ... we do not speak great things, but we live them.” The way we live among unbelievers matters. Make no mistake, your neighbours, your work mates, your friends, your family members are watching you, and your life communicates your truth.

Everything in me wants to retaliate against injustice, sometimes my sinful desires makes me want revenge or leads me to contemplate evil. But as a citizen of heaven, Peter says, I should live an exemplary good life, and live to bless those around me. As he says in verse 16: *Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.*

How we care for our neighbours and friends during COVID19 matters. How we live out our faith with real difference in our speech and our conduct, bears witness to the truth.

Coronavirus is not our first plague. The plague in Cyprian's day was an opportunity for Christians to show sacrificial care. As the pagans pushed the sick and dying into the streets, Christians with scant regard for their own lives, showed the love of Christ in providing care, some of them contracting the plague themselves, as they nursed people back to health. And the effect of this outworking of love? The church grew as people saw faith in action.

I do take issue with Bishop Cyprian on one matter. When he says "we do not speak great things, but we live them", I think he misses an important point, that Peter makes in v15 which is my second observation for how we live Christianly in a hostile world:

2. Giving an account of Hope – vv 15-16

Listen to verses 15 and 16: (I'm reading here from the NIV) "in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,"

The point is, that once the goodness of our lives has drawn the attention of the unbeliever, we ought to be ready to speak, to answer their questions. Cyprian is right, that we need to live good lives, but not so right that we DON'T speak. Peter says we live such good lives first, and then speak to give an account of our hope when we are asked.

This speaking is translated in the NRSV as a "defence" or an "answer" in the NIV. It translates the Greek word "apologia" – an apology, a reasoned response of why you believe what you believe.

As a young Christian at University, I wanted to make sure that I was a Christian because of my own conviction and not as an accident of upbringing. Reading all the apologetics I could get my hands on, was formative as I explored my reasoned response for believing. And if you'd never done it, can I recommend it? Get some evidence so that you can answer questions.

I often ask people who are looking for ministry roles in the Diocese of Tasmania, what they would say if someone on a bus asked them what they believed and why. I want to know what they would say before the person got off at the next stop. I reckon every Christian ought to be able to do that. Two minutes flat, what do you believe and why?

The question is, are you living such a distinctively hope filled life, say in the face of Coronavirus at the moment, that someone is going to ask about your hope? And if asked, are you prepared to explain why you believe what you believe?

But as Peter Says – always with gentleness and respect for those with whom you speak.

My third observation for living Christianly in a hostile world is

3. Bearing Suffering

It is clear that Peter thinks that Christians will suffer: "All kinds of trials" as he says in chapter one, the "fiery ordeal" as he says in Chapter 4, "evil and abuse" in our text today.

And listen to verse 14: “even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed”. and Verses 17: it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.”

The point he makes is that the WAY we suffer matters for our testimony to the world. How the world will perceive the gospel of Christ, will depend in some measure on the way Christians suffer.

I have a book at home on my shelf, with the cheery title “Killing Christians: Living the faith where it is not safe to believe”. It is a book about martyrdom. The most intense form of suffering. And each story in the book, tells of the faith and witness of a modern Christian martyr – in Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Gaza strip. Each tells of the faithfulness to Christ of the Christian martyr, and the impact of that as a witness to the world.

This is the same point that historian Rodney Stark makes about credibility of the Christian faith in the first centuries. Listen to what he says: “Of all the proofs and all the testimonials, nothing approaches the credibility inherent in martyrdom. How could mere mortals remain defiant after being skinned and covered with salt? How could anyone keep the faith while being slowly roasted on a spit? Such performances seemed virtually supernatural in and of themselves. And that was the effect they often had on the observers ... [as one pagan wrote] “their contempt of death ... is patent to us every day”.³

My hope is that you will never suffer being skinned alive and covered with salt, or be roasted on a spit, or martyred in any form. But rest assured, with Peter, that the way we live confidently and hopefully through suffering, (any suffering, but especially at the hand of unbelievers) we speak loudly about the God in whom we trust. Remember last week? 1 Peter 2: 12 *Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*

My three observations about living Christianly in a hostile world:

Living good lives

Giving an account of hope

Bearing suffering

But I also promised you a grounding for all these behaviours, and that is, that they are all **Modelled on Christ vv 18-22**

Verse 18 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, AND verse 22: “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Christ is the model, the grounding, the pattern, of faithful living that we are called to, among the pagans. His suffering for sins, the righteous one for the unrighteous many to

³ Rodney Stark *The triumph of Christianity*,. 151

bring us to God. He has done that for us, his death and his resurrection and ascension into heaven guaranteeing our place, is motivation enough for all of this.

Peter wants the Christians to look to him for their motivation and hope.

Now, the observant ones among you will notice I have jumped over the some of the most difficult to understand words in the New Testament in vv 19-21. I am going to leave them for another day.

Peter is calling the Christians of Asia Minor, the Exiles of Dispersion he calls them, to live distinctive lives modelled on Christ: Good lives, Giving account of our hope and bearing suffering in his name so that others might be drawn to him.

Will you join me in living like that today, as exiles in our own world, so that we might win some for God?