

Responding to Difficulty like Jesus

1 Peter 3:8-18

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I'm sure that for many of you, and that includes me, the highlight of your Friday is when the All Saints newsletter pops into your mailbox. You eagerly open it to see what the subject for Sunday's talks are so that you can look forward to hearing them over the next 48 hours. For some the waiting is almost too much to bear, isn't that right?

So, if indeed you have already read the newsletter, you will have seen a reference to an Istanbul fish market. Istanbul, that wonderful city sitting on the dividing line between Europe and Asia, once known as Constantinople and before that Byzantium – the capital of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

And it was in this city, in the year 1436, not long before the city fell to the Ottoman Empire and ceased to be a Christian city, as I say in the year 1436, that an unknown person went down to the market to buy fruit and vegetables, and some fish. What kind of fish I have no idea but whatever they bought was wrapped up. Some of us are old enough to remember fresh fish being wrapped up in paper, even old newspaper. This piece of fish was not wrapped in paper but something more expensive parchment or maybe vellum.

When the fish buyer returned home and opened up the fish, he or she must have been astonished by what they saw. And what was it that they had found? (Well, more of that later).

So, we have now reached the fourth in our mini-series on Peter's first letter. In case you missed the other three or have forgotten the background and content for this letter. Here is a swift recap...

This letter was almost certainly written around the early 60's AD. Peter the Galilean fisherman has made it to Rome. He, with the calloused hands, and weather-beaten face and body; he who was described by the Jewish leaders as unlearned – someone who hadn't gone to Rabbi university, has travelled by land and sea from the land of his birth to the greatest city ever known with a population of up to 1 million people. But because he was a Jew and had left school without any qualifications, his Greek wasn't of the best. So, it is very likely that he sat down with Silvanus or Silas as he was also known who was a Roman citizen like Paul and probably Silvanus tidied up Peter's Greek – a good example of partnership in the gospel.

In another part of this great city, can be found his fellow apostle and brother in Christ, Paul, probably under house arrest. Incidentally Silas had been a junior partner with Paul on his travels across the countries and islands bordering the Mediterranean.

And across Rome there are little and large house-churches attracting a growing number of people from all sections of society from slaves to people who are on the imperial staff or household, to wealthy citizens.

But the skies have been getting darker for the Christian community. Rumours spread about what they get up to in their gatherings. Some say human sacrifice takes place and even worse the eating of human flesh and drinking blood. On another level, the word is that in this new sect or cult, slaves and master are regarded as equal, women are treated respectfully and with consideration; those without a formal education are known to teach the better educated and those with higher status. The Roman and Greek Gods are deemed not to exist and the statues or effigies of them are seen as entirely man-made and without any power whatsoever. All of this goes against the grain of polite and impolite society alike.

Add to this context, an unstable and cruel Emperor in the form of Nero and being a Christian brings with it risks, dangers and threats. The Jerusalem church has already experienced persecution causing many Christians to get far away from Jerusalem and soon the same will be true for Christians in Rome, especially after the devastating fire that broke out in Rome in July AD 64, is blamed on Christians by Nero, in order to deflect the accusations that were levelled against him for starting the fire. In that wave of persecution probably both Paul and Peter were martyred for their faith.

So, Peter can see the suffering that is already taking place and he can probably see that it is only going to get worse. He would have remembered the words of Jesus telling him and the other disciples some of the things that would occur after he had left them and how they would be treated badly been to the point of death. He would have remembered and often repeated those words of Jesus which were amongst the best-known words of Jesus in the early church – the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:11-12

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.

And Peter more or less quotes this when he writes in Chapter 4:

1 Peter 4:12-14

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Peter is acutely conscious therefore of the suffering church, the sufferings that individual Christians are going through and sufferings caused not by the general sadnesses and blows that all humans experience but sufferings brought about because of a choice made to follow Jesus and to name him and not the emperor or any other person or God as Lord. Sufferings that few, if any, of us here today have experienced.

The words 'suffer' or 'suffering' occur no less than 19 times in this first letter of Peter. That is the same number in this five-chapter letter as you get if you add up all the times the word appears in the 70 chapters that make up the letter-books of Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and first Thessalonians. And Paul who wrote all of those was no stranger to suffering.

To suffer for being a Christian was a reality for many if not most Christians in those early decades and centuries, as it is for those today in North Korea, much of the middle east and north Africa and China as well as many other places. And yet the church kept on growing and growing.

Tertullian who lived in North Africa in the second century and who was a prolific and skilled writer said famously that '*the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*'

And there is much truth in that. God often blesses the sacrifice and suffering. But as is normally the case, God's blessing and power is demonstrated through the lives of faithful, authentic and dedicated Christians. The way they live their lives and the way they speak and listen. And in our reading today we see Peter exhorting those hard-pressed scattered Christians to witness to Christ and the truth of the gospel in three ways:

Three reasons:

1. By demonstrating Christ-like qualities in their fellowship with one another
2. By speaking clearly and respectfully to others not of the faith, about their faith
3. By responding to evil by doing good and meeting cursing with blessing.

Let's look briefly at these three ways of Christian witness.

1. Demonstrating Christ-like qualities in their fellowship with one another

Scattered throughout the letter Peter gives guidance as to how Christians in every generation should conduct themselves. He addresses them and us in our roles as husbands and wives; servants, slaves and masters; citizens, older church leaders or younger people in the church. And he commends these virtues and qualities to them and to us:

Purity of living, a reverence for God, heart-felt love for fellow-Christians, patience even when under suffering, respect for all men even the Emperor who treats you so badly, quietness of spirit, gentleness, humility and compassion.

In verses 8-9 of our passage he says (using the paraphrase in the Message version of the Bible):

1 Peter 3:8-9

⁸ Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. ⁹ No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that's your job, to bless.

You are, of course, familiar with all these qualities and others. You have heard many a sermon on the fruits of the Spirit, on Paul's words commending love as the greatest of all virtues. And each time we hear them, if we are listening with open hearts and ears, we are challenged. Is my life like that? Is the life of All Saints like that? Are its leaders at whatever level like that?

Very often in those first decades and centuries of the church they were like that. Sceptics and enemies alike when they got beyond the fake news and the lies found that these little and large bands of Christian believers really did practise with each other what they preached to each other. Women and slaves so used to being only the property of men and treated like property to be kicked or kicked out whenever their husbands and masters felt like it, found that they were treated with consideration and respect. Old people who were left to fend for themselves when they could no longer work were taken care of. Those children whose parents had died were looked after. No Christian would ever leave an unwanted baby on a hillside either to die or to be picked up by a stranger – which was a common Roman practice. No wonder people who knew Christians firsthand were attracted to this new faith and prepared to pay the social, financial and physical costs of belonging to it. A Roman Emperor who had rejected the Christianity of his youth and tried to reintroduce the worship of the old gods once said: *"Christians have gained most popularity because of their charity to strangers and because of their care for the burial of their dead."*

Someone once said that a *'saint is someone who makes it easier to believe in God'* Does the life of All Saints when people get to know it *'make it easier for people to believe in God'*? I would like to think so and indeed I believe it to be so.

But of course, as St Paul wrote once *'not that I have already attained the end'*. For any Christian no matter how advanced in years and knowledge, for any church no matter how large or thriving, there is more road to travel, more character to develop, more of Christ to learn and copy, more to be attained.

2. People were won over, and the church grew because of the persuasive, gentle reasoning of Christians

Peter urges his readers and hearers to:

1 Peter 3:8-9

¹⁵ 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.

Now there's a challenge for us. Just imagine someone asking you something like *'Tell me why you are a Christian'* or perhaps *'You always seem so cheerful and positive, I never hear you grumbling or running someone down. Why is that?'* How confident are we to give an answers which makes it clear why we believe and what we believe. Or would we stumble over our words. Or would we/do we falter in the face of questions about being a Christian?

Sadly, too many of us are tongue-tied when it comes to speaking openly about our faith; we are far from being bold witnesses.

I suppose I can take comfort from the fact that Peter says wait for someone to ask you and that rarely happens especially in our culture. That said, I also know I should be looking for little opportunities and cracks in the door to drop a seed here and a word there. And Paul did write about preaching the word in season and out of season i.e. when it was convenient to people and when not. But I guess we need extra special discernment to speak a word out of season! But whenever we speak or witness to Jesus in words we should do so with gentleness and respect. Those have not always been the hallmarks of Christian witness and evangelism. Gentleness and respect.

3. By responding to evil by doing good and meeting cursing with blessing.

Thirdly and perhaps most difficult of all for us to emulate, is the way that on countless occasions, Christians demonstrated that they chose to bless people rather than curse them even when they themselves were being treated unfairly, slandered or facing severe persecution for the crime of saying and believing that Jesus is Lord.

In verse 9 Peter writes:

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, and even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

And in the previous chapter he says to slaves, words which strike us uncomfortably today in our age of rights and redress when injury is done.

I wonder how many of us here today can think back on some unjust injury done to us, probably not because of our Christian faith but for some other reason. Was it done by an employer, a supervisor or manager, a teacher, a parent, a friend, a stranger, a thief, a partner? Someone who cheated on us in a relationship; abused us as a child or adult; took something that rightfully belonged to us; told lies about us; belittled us in front of others.

Maybe some of you are fortunate and can say 'no none of that has ever happened to me'. But I suspect if you are, you are in the minority. But if it did how did you react then, especially if you saw yourself as a Christian? And perhaps more importantly how do you see that person or persons and that situation now? Do you still nurse a grievance and a rising sense of anger when you think about it, or have you been able to let it go or even as Peter encourages us, have you been able to go so far as to repay an evil with a kind actor hateful words with a prayer asking for blessing on that person? That of course is the Jesus way.

It was the way of Stephen when he was martyred '*Lord lay not this sin to their charge*' It was the way of William Tyndale as he was burnt at the stake for translating the Bible into English "*Lord open the king of England's eyes*". It was the way of Corrie Ten Boom when she saw after the war at a church meeting one of the Nazi concentration camp guards who had so abused her, her sister and father (both of whom had died in the camp). She saw recognised him in the congregation evening one night as she was speaking. But it was not without a struggle that she raised her hand to shake his and offer blessing and forgive.

Repaying a wrong doe, sometimes a very great wrong done with forgiveness and blessing - the Jesus way.

Now, at long last back to that manuscript that held fish from the market of Constantinople, in the early fifteenth century. What was it?

Well, it turned out to be a 2-300 old manuscript, containing copies of writings by a famous 2nd century Christian called Justin Martyr who was indeed martyred for his faith and then right at the end was a hitherto unknown letter by an unknown Christian to a man called Diognetus who was curious about the Christian faith.

These writings are written in defence of the Christian faith and of Christians. They do so for the most part gently and with respect. They give good reasons for the truth and integrity and the reasonableness of the Christian faith whilst pointing out the contrasts with the cruel and hedonistic lifestyles and beliefs of those who adhere to the Greek and Roman gods. Their defences are mostly a series of arguments or as call them apologetics, but also both writers point to the way Christians behave. And the way they behave is just how the apostles expected them to behave.

Here is an extract from that 2nd century letter to Diognetus,

“Christians marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all. They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endued with life. They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they abound in all things. They are dishonoured, and yet they are glorified in their dishonour. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and yet they bless.”

What a witness in word and character!

Oh, that we could so witness to our families, friends, work colleagues, authorities, community through the deep-rooted qualities of our live together as a church, through the gentle and respectful but clear words of our testimony and preaching and through the way we respond to wrong done to us.

Brothers and sisters let us in this moment resolve to be more like that as a church and as the individuals we are.



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