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Sermon

Submitting to the Best Shepherd

1 Peter 2:19-25 with Acts 2: 42-47; Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

11th May 2014, © 2014 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

On the Day of Pentecost, 3000 converts along with 120 disciples formed a new community and, we heard in today's reading, devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, prayer and breaking bread together. Those same activities form the essentials of our meetings even today. We claim in the creeds to believe in an Apostolic church – one following the teaching of the Apostles. When we read Peter's letter we are reading a teaching of an Apostle.

Peter is addressing relatively new, Jewish Christians. How do I know they are relatively new? Because he says so earlier on. Continuing from 1 Peter 1:23 where we finished last week, he urges his readers to live good lives and ...

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”¹

Just as the new converts in Jerusalem devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, so these believers and indeed all of us should crave good spiritual food.

Peter is concerned about Christians' relationships with non-Christians, authorities and each other. By the time he wrote this², persecutions were starting under the Emperor Nero and they needed encouragement to stand firm in their faith. The needed guidance in their responses.

1 Peter 2:11-12 “I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Peter calls Christians “aliens and strangers in the world.” Not alien as from outer space but in the sense of foreigner. He is saying our citizenship is in heaven. We are passing through but this is not where we belong.

There is a letter written to a man named Diognetus between A.D. 130 and 200. Here is a portion of what he wrote:

“Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language, or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect... They live in both Greek and foreign

¹ 1 Peter 2:2-3

² In the early 60's it is deduced.

cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food, and other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the unusual form of their own citizenship.

They live in their own native lands, but as aliens... Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They marry and have children just like everyone else, but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws and go beyond the laws in their own lives.

They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are dishonoured and yet gain glory through dishonour. Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others.

When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility.”

This was a description of Christians in the second century. It describes a church which has grasped the idea of being “in the world but not of the world.”

When you live in a foreign country you see the culture more clearly because some things are different and attract your attention. You are free of some of the constraints of belonging. When Helen and I were first in London for six months, we had no interest in shopping apart from food. Why? Because we knew anything we bought would have to be carried back to NZ in a suitcase or given away. It made us less materialistic.

We are to live as foreigners and strangers in our own land. That means we would not be so bound to the culture and habits of the people. Instead we would base our values and ways on our true home which is with God in heaven. There will be different values and priorities.

How well do we measure up on this? I believe that the world tends to influence the church too readily. I said foreigners can see a culture more clearly than those living in it. I met some Chinese Christians at theological college. The effect of culture on them and on English students was shown by their saying that putting parents in a rest home was clearly unchristian, but they could not see any problem with aborting unwanted babies. They were affected by their culture and we by ours.

Peter continues directly onto their submission to rulers and submission of slaves to their masters. “Submission” is not a dirty word in his thinking. For some since the 1960’s, it is. But not to Peter. We submit to rulers because God has established them for the good of society. In the midst of talking of submission, he emphasises, “Live as free men” – how? - by living as “servants of God.” There is no shame in submitting to God. We should be ashamed of not submitting to so powerful, creative and loving a person.

Was it a bit much to tell slaves to submit to their masters? Peter referred to household slaves (*oiketes*) specifically not using the general term for slave (*doulos*). These people had fairly normal marital lives. Often people sold themselves into such slavery (for a period of time) as a way to get ahead in the world.³ And we needn’t imagine that the apostles approved of slavery. Paul, for example, says that slave-traders will not be saved.⁴ If there were nothing wrong with it, he would not have disapproved on the trade so strongly. He said that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, but we are all one.⁵ To teach like that is to sow the seeds for the breakdown of slavery. However, the Roman empire was based on slavery and would have collapsed immediately without it. There would need to be a slow process of change. So for now, slaves were to submit to their masters. This is the context of this reading from 1 Peter.

Now we might think that has nothing to do with us, but if it is good enough for a slave to learn how to cope with injustice, it is worth our learning too. Basically, Peter says if you are going to suffer, better to suffer it

³ NIV Bible Commentary on the New Testament on this text.

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:10

⁵ Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11

for being good than for being bad. If you do good, being aware of God and then suffer for it, God will reward you because your devotion to God overrules your personal comfort. If you suffer because you simply acted badly, it is what you deserve.

He gives the example of Jesus handling persecution and false accusation. When he was accused, he did not defend himself. Do you remember that Pilate marvelled that Jesus did not respond to his accusers in the trial? Are you like that? Our sinful nature likes to justify itself. We don't want people to think poorly of us. Some are quick to deny even what they have done not being ready to own up to their responsibilities. How about deciding to be like Jesus not justify yourself – it is an unattractive character trait to see in other people. Don't be quick to tell people it's not your fault – even if it isn't.

Jesus bore his sufferings without threatening the soldiers, even though he could have called down squadrons of angels he kept quiet. They insulted him and he absorbed it. In fact, if you read through the accounts of his suffering, you see that he gave grace in return for every offence.

How did he do it? By entrusting himself to God the just judge.

Remember we saw that Peter was addressing relatively new Christians yet he called them to a high level of commitment. He called them to a self-sacrificial life. Is that what we live? Are we more concerned to follow Jesus' example or to demand our rights?

If we are asked to serve, do we serve or refuse? If we are offended, how quick are we to forgive? If we are treated unjustly, is that something we are prepared to absorb or do we make a real fuss over it? Our culture has become more and more 'me-focussed.' That is simply selfishness. It is certainly unChristlike.

It is easy to think, "I cannot do that." But again the answer lies in Peter's words: Verse 24: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." Jesus has dealt with the bondage of our self. He sets us free from the compulsion to sin and makes it possible for us to live righteously. A key to understanding this is that we often try to be good **for** God. We struggle and strive against the temptation we face. But we forget that we have already shown we can't do it ourselves. It is God who gives us strength and changes us. Rather than try to offer him the finished result of our righteousness, we need to trust him do it in us. We need to will what is right and call on God to do it through us.

Peter uses the analogy of sheep going astray. Have you had much to do with sheep? They have an incredible ability to wander off in the wrong direction. You've seen them in sheepdog trials, suddenly dashing off missing the gate and having to be brought around again. In the West we drive sheep rather than lead them as they do in the Middle-East. So we increase the likelihood that they will go astray. Nonetheless, they can be very silly creatures.

Happily for us, silly creatures as we are, there is a good shepherd willing to rescue us and to lead us. That Shepherd described himself in the gospel reading and we learn more about him from Psalm 23. You know them both and we won't explore them today, but it would do your spirit and soul good to read them over prayerfully.

But let me point out one gem: the Psalm refers to 'The LORD.' That is one of those places when it is the name of God. It really reads, Yahweh shepherds me. The creator of the universe, the saviour of your soul, personally attends to you. How can we not give ourselves to fulfil all he asks of us?