



Sermon

The One You Follow is Lord of Heaven and Earth

1 Peter 3:13-22

14th May 2023

© 2023 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

The Letter so far:

Peter, remember, is writing to Jewish believers scattered around the Eastern Mediterranean. He started with praise to God for His grace and salvation and moved onto exhortations to holiness of life. He wrote that Jesus is the living stone rejected by men but chosen by God and believers are living stones in the house of God. Our calling is high indeed as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

As he wrote to people experiencing persecution, he helped them with the appropriate attitude to authority and suffering and reminded them of the example Jesus set of not complaining when suffering even unjustly.

Don't Be Afraid

As we pick up the reading today, Peter continues with advice to persecuted Christians: "Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened." He is quoting from Isaiah 8. This is not a random choice of a suitable sentiment. In that passage, God was speaking to Isaiah and told him not to be afraid of the Assyrians who were coming against the Northern Kingdom.

Do not fear what they fear, do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary, but for both the houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.¹

Does that seem familiar? It should do, since it is what Peter was quoting when he was writing about Christ as the cornerstone who was rejected by many. Again, the destination of the Isaiah's passage is to fear God rather than man. We need to care more about what God thinks than what people think. Is that so for you and me? It can be very difficult. Most of us hate to stand out from the crowd, we don't want to be different and criticised. But we need to care more what God thinks than what 'they' think. If we "set apart Christ as Lord" as Peter says, then we will obey him. Otherwise, who is our Lord? Are we submitting to the idol of public opinion or the tyranny of self-worship?

¹ Isaiah 8:12b-14a

Christ is Victor

From verse 18, Peter recounts again a summary of what Jesus achieved on the cross. Last time, it was as an example for us of patient suffering. This time the focus has shifted to victory.

^{v18} “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” concluding with v22 [Christ] “has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”

Here is the assurance that the one we follow is victorious. He has the power to bring things to his declared conclusion. We may not like all that happens on the way, but he is the Victor and what he says will happen will.

Note that Christ died for sins once for all. It was a single offering and it was enough. Do you remember the words of the 1662 Communion service? “...A full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation [which means offering] and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.”² It does not need repetition. His offering of himself was sufficient to deal the sins of all the world. In it Jesus the righteous one died for the sins of us the unrighteous. Not all people will trust in that sacrifice and so benefit from it but those who do, are saved from the judgement of God.

The Spirits in Prison

In telling us about Jesus' victory through the cross, Peter says in verses 18-20:

He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

There are three main interpretations of his preaching to the spirits in prison. Be warned this is a difficult passage. Martin Luther wrote, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.”³

Option 1. Between his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus went to the place of the dead and preached to the spirits of Noah's wicked contemporaries. There are difficulties with this understanding.

- a. The Bible never uses the simple term ‘spirits’ to refer to humans only to supernatural beings.
- b. Why would these people in particular be chosen and not all the dead?
- c. Elsewhere the Bible make it clear that there is no second chance for salvation⁴.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the writer states: “... man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...”⁵ Reincarnation and a second chance after death are not options.

In the Parable of the Rich man and the Beggar Lazarus, a story which Jesus himself told, there was a beggar and a rich and selfish man. They both died and were in the place of the dead. When the formerly rich man saw Lazarus, far away with Abraham, he asked that Lazarus bring him cold water. But Abraham replied, “... between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”⁶ It is clear that the division is between the righteous and the unrighteous. There was no possibility of change in that story.

² BCP p255

³ Quoted from Luther's Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude, by Edmund Clowney, BST: 1 Peter.

⁴ Luke 16:19-31; Hebrews 9:27

⁵ Hebrews 9:27

⁶ Luke 16:26

Option 2: Some hold that in his pre-incarnate state Christ went and preached though Noah to the wicked generation of that time. But then why mention it in the context of Jesus' death and resurrection?

Option 3: In his resurrected state (alive in the Spirit), Christ went to the place of incarceration for fallen angels and there preached to the angels (spirits) who are said to have left their proper state and married women during Noah's time.⁷ The majority of commentators seem to take this last view (including N.T. Wright⁸).

So, Peter, why did you mention it? I think Peter must have heard it from Jesus himself – who else would know? And why? - because it relates to the idea he is developing - that Jesus Christ has authority over angels, authorities and powers. (v22). The terms authorities and powers are used several times elsewhere for ranks of supernatural beings.⁹

When you are facing persecution, when the life of the Church is threatened, when it appears that evil is triumphing over good, you want to know that Jesus has greater authority. We may be in a war, but the final outcome is already known – Jesus wins!

Baptism

Having mentioned Noah, Peter goes on to discuss an analogy between Noah's flood and baptism.

Firstly, Noah's flood waters were a judgement which brought death to the wicked. Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives were saved through the waters by God in the ark. Similarly Christians are taken safely through judgement in Christ. We are taken into Christ and there find safety.

Secondly, in baptism we pass through the waters which represent Christ's death and resurrection. Going down into the water represents dying with Christ and dying to self. Coming up out of the water represents His resurrection – and our being restored to new life – born again.

Peter says it is not about washing the body from dirt - physical washing is not the point. It is a symbol of what Christ has done for us and our being united with him. He says that baptism "is a pledge (or appeal [ESV]) of a good conscience to God."¹⁰ The NIV Bible Commentary says:

The conviction of sin by the Spirit in the human mind calls for a response of faith of commitment to Christ and his work. This is concretely and "contractually" done in the act of baptism. Saving faith is expressed in baptism.¹¹

How is baptism effective? It is through the resurrection of Jesus. We don't believe in a dead saviour, who paid the penalty and remained dead. We believe in a saviour who died to pay the penalty but rose again to eternal life. Baptism connects us to that resurrection which is the saving power.

Why do we get baptised? Because Jesus commanded his disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

⁷ Cf Genesis 6:1-4; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6

⁸ Wright wrote in a paper: "1 Peter 3:18-22 ... has sometimes been interpreted as offering a 'second chance' to people who do not have faith in this life. But, as has been argued at length by commentators of various outlooks, the writer is most probably referring to Christ's proclamation to evil spirits that their power had been broken. In any case, the next chapter (1 Peter 4, especially vv 17-18) rules out any possibility that 'those who do not obey God's gospel' will be saved." Wright N.T., 1979, *Towards a Biblical View of Universalism*, accessed from http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/4.2_Wright.pdf

⁹ E.g., Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:16, 2:15.

¹⁰ Verse 21.

¹¹ P1055

Baptism is the sign of the new covenant. I remember a missionary to Nepal, telling me that the Nepalese did not object to their people converting to Christ but they strongly objected to baptism – it was an imprisonable offence. They saw that as the significant step out of Hinduism.

Because it is the sign of the covenant, it is the condition for receiving Holy Communion which is the covenant meal. That is why, the Church has said from very early days, that you must be baptised to take communion.

We have heard from Peter that we should not be afraid, that Christ is the Victor and that in baptism we are saved by the resurrection of Jesus.

In baptism, we publicly declare our incorporation into Christ and our intention to set him apart as Lord and the Victor over death and evil and so we need not be afraid but can follow him wholeheartedly.