

Lent 1B 18 February 2024
1 Peter 3:18–22
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God, now and forever. Amen.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. Let's pray: ...

Noah, floods, rainbows, baptism, and Christ – a symphony of suffering! Who's in?

Our Epistle today is bracketed by two calls to suffer (1 Peter 3:17 and 1 Peter 4:1). The main point of these verses is to help us understand that we suffer with Jesus for doing what's right. For all the puzzling things in these verses, it's important to note that Peter's intention is to encourage our faith to endure suffering for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.

We're largely insulated from the bigger world beyond our shores. For most of the world being a Christian isn't safe. In the first three centuries when the Church was spreading like wildfire, every Christian lived with the reality of testifying to the faith at the risk of their life.

Imagine evangelism in a context where you couldn't make any promises to people that things would get better for them on earth, and they'd be risking their lives if they followed Christ. That was normal in the early Church and is still the case in many places today. Does that challenge you?

We struggle with evangelism because we assume that safety is normal, and tend to use that false assumption to define where the mission of the gospel will succeed.

By contrast, it's normal in most places to suffer for being Christian. To be safe and respected is the exception, not the rule. One example. In Iran, conversion from Islam to Christianity is illegal, and anyone caught as a convert can face long prison sentences (or worse). And yet, reliable studies report that there're over one million Christian believers in Iran today. Those involved with the discrete "house church" movement suggest several million. Mosques are empty and Christianity is flourishing in a country regularly featured as one of the top ten persecutors of Christians in the world.

Lent, then, is an appropriate time to revisit Peter's teaching on suffering, that we may be strengthened and encouraged to share our faith. St Peter effectively says that we're aliens and exiles here and that it's *not* surprising or abnormal when the cultural powers that be, revile Christianity. After all, as St Matthew says, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household" [10:25]!

So, let's explore five ways that Peter helps us to understand suffering, should God will it.

1. Remember that Christ suffered

Following Paul who says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10); Peter reiterates the mindset of Christianity in the New Testament when he says: "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:17) and, "For Christ also suffered" [:18]. Our Lord suffered; we'll follow him in suffering.

[Hebrews 13:12,13] says, "Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured." And Jesus says, "'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'" (Mark 8:34). Jesus bore the cross; we'll bear the cross.

The first great encouragement to prepare ourselves for suffering for doing what is right is that Jesus, the greatest, most loving, caring, forgiving, truthful, holy man that ever lived, leads the way.

2. Christ has triumphed and brought us safe to God

Why would anyone become Christian if all we can offer them is that things in this world will probably get worse for them and their lives could be at risk? What people struggle to accept is that the greatest human need is not to live long and comfortably on the earth. The greatest human need is to have our sins forgiven. Forgiveness overcomes our separation from God so that we can live forever with happiness, in his presence.

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

- Christ died “for sins.” Sin separates us from God. Sin is our biggest enemy; not Satan. To our great relief, we don’t have to die in our sins because Jesus died “for sins.” And in him there is forgiveness. This is why people follow Jesus even if it costs them their lives.
- Christ died “the righteous for the unrighteous.” Jesus took our place. He took the penalty that we deserved and bore it for us.
- Christ died “once for all.” Jesus’ death was all-sufficient to accomplish the forgiveness of all who believe in him. Jesus has done all things necessary to take away the guilt of our sins and our debt is paid in full. “It is finished.”
- Christ died “in order to bring you to God.” Through our suffering, the devil tries to make us think that God has forsaken us. But God hasn’t forsaken us. He gave up Jesus for us and suffering reminds us of what Christ did to bring us safely to God. Christ defeated sin, and God is near, in, and for us.

3. Remember the days of Noah

Noah was mocked for obeying God; for being a righteous man. So God sent Jesus, in the spirit, to preach to the disobedient people through Noah. Only eight, including Noah, listened and were saved.

Just as the spirit of Jesus spoke through the Old Testament prophets, so the spirit of Jesus was in Noah preaching to the corrupt and violent people of Noah's day. Because they rejected that preaching, they’re now in prison awaiting the final judgement (see Luke 16:24).

There’re three ways that this strengthens us for suffering.

- First, we’re reassured that Christ isn’t bound by space and time. He speaks to us today just as he spoke in the days of Noah. He promises to be with us to the end of the age, helping us in our suffering.
- Second, it’s better to obey and suffer than to disobey and be cast into the prison of [19]. Those in Noah’s time thought it was foolish to heed God’s call. So, they revelled in their wickedness, until the rain started. People can be converted with a message that calls for suffering, because it’s temporary suffering that prevents eternal suffering.

- Third, there's every advantage to being a small, rejected minority. That's the point in verse 20 where it says that in the ark "a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water." It must have raised doubts being such a small minority, but, their faithful suffering pleased God and he blessed Noah and his sons (Genesis 9:1).

4. Remember your baptism

Peter makes the connection for us between the water that saved Noah's family and Christian baptism. "And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" [:21].

When we're baptised, God brings us through death and judgement, resurrecting us to new and everlasting life through Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism saves for one reason: it bestows faith. In [Romans 10:13] Paul says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Baptism is such a calling.

When we're baptised, we're buried with Christ and we're raised with him. The suffering we experience can't be God's condemnation because Christ has endured that for us. Baptism is a constant reminder that the worst suffering has been averted. Christ took it for us. We'll never have to face judgement. We've already died that death in Christ and been raised in him. Our present suffering isn't the wrath of God but our preparation for glory. Baptism saves.

5. Christ rules over all things

If nothing else, remember this. Demons aren't free to do as they please. All angels, authorities, powers, evil spirits, demons, and Satan himself are subject to Christ. To rebuke and resist the devil, simply say this: "You are subject to Jesus. Jesus reigns at God's right hand and you are under him. You can do nothing without his permission. You can't touch me unless he lets you. And he will only let you in order to drive me back to Jesus and the cross; to his glory."

So, stand firm Saints, in this great faith, because Christ has suffered that we may enjoy eternal life with him. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.