

“A Vital ‘if’” – 1 Peter 1:13-23 – Easter 3, Apr 10, 2005

I suspect most of you either saw on TV or read in the paper about the young woman from the North Shore who was arrested recently and spent a couple of nights in jail in Athens, Greece, because she picked up a rock while touring the Parthenon? She certainly seemed a bit surprised by it all, but not terribly remorseful – as she was interviewed upon arriving home she dismissed the whole incident as being a ‘misunderstanding’, in that they had only picked up the rock for a photograph. As it turned out, her stay in jail was not terribly uncomfortable, but it certainly could have been a whole lot worse.

I don’t know for certain that there are signs in many languages at the Parthenon pointing out that it is highly illegal to remove stones as souvenirs, but I’m willing to bet that there are signs, and warnings in the brochures, and even that the teacher leading the tour pointed it out. The Greeks are understandably concerned about the gradual disappearance of these antiquities one little stone at a time.

It may have just been bravado for the TV cameras, but the young woman didn’t seem, to me at least, to have learned just how serious it can be to violate the laws, rules and customs of foreign countries, whether by intent or by accident. There is an Australian man facing execution in Indonesia in the very near future for drug trafficking, and all the protests and assertions by the Australian government that he was working undercover for them have so far fallen on deaf ears. One needs to be very, very cautious about offending the residents of a foreign country when in their territory or on their land.

I think that’s the message that Peter was trying to convey to whomever it was he was writing to in the letter that we call 1st Peter. From his opening words it seems to have been addressed to a large number of the faithful who were in Gentile territory, and from the rest of what he had to say and how he said it, it seems as though those people were themselves new Gentile converts to faith in Christ. The letter sounds a lot like instructions for new believers, and the portion we heard deals with general living or behaviour.

The early Christians to whom Peter wrote did not have an easy time – this new faith which they had adopted ushered them into a whole new territory, almost the equivalent of actually moving to a new country. It was a dangerous new territory for these new believers, with former friends and even family now becoming either agents of temptation or even agents of persecution and death. The new believers were subjected to all kinds of pressures to return to the life they had lived before. They were mocked for their faithful waiting for the return of Jesus, a return that seemed to become less and less likely as more and more time passed. Uncertainty set in, and it was inevitable that they would become uncertain about how to behave, and would gradually lose their moral focus – “we weren’t really ‘removing’ the rock, we were just taking it over there for a picture!”

So, Peter wrote to these people, immigrants into a foreign land – the kingdom – although they hadn’t moved house, to provide them with advice on what was expected of them in this new territory. He begins with a preamble, outlining what God has accomplished in the revelation of Jesus, warning them to get ready to respond. “Prepare your minds for action”, he instructs them, signaling that much will be expected of them. Moreover, in saying this Peter tells them up front that they are not about to be given a simple, or simplistic, set of rules which they can mindlessly obey. He lets them know right at the beginning that they will be expected to put their minds into action, that they will actually have to think about what they are doing, about what it is that God expects from them. Anticipating their reaction will be a childish “that’s too difficult”, Peter encourages them to “set all their hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring when he is revealed”, and not to fall back into the old desires and ways of their past - which of course was what they still saw around them every day.

Note that Peter does not order them to behave in a certain way. Instead he presents it to them as a proposition: “if you invoke as Father the one who judges without favoritism ... then live in reverent fear during your exile.” The choice is theirs whether or not to follow Jesus’ lead in

acknowledging God as Father, but the implication is also very clear that if they do so there is a corresponding obligation in behaviour. This is a most crucial 'if' – a vital and vitally important 'if', especially when you recall the word 'vital' means 'alive'. Peter is literally putting before them the option to choose life, and being clear that so choosing implies living that new life a certain way. Naturally he assumes that his readers have, or will, choose to call God 'Father', as he moves on to confirm that they have indeed received new life, have been "born anew", and describes that new life as being imperishable, being given through the Spirit of God by the word of God.

Of course, children, even obedient children, even obedient children of God, tend to ask as their first question, "why?", and Peter beats them to the punch with an answer. This call to living in reverent fear is in response to being ransomed, bought out of slavery to sin, by Christ's blood. There was a purpose to Christ's sacrifice, and that purpose was so that those who would believe and respond would come to trust in God, being able to set their faith and hope in God's saving love and grace.

If the first question asked by children is "why?", the next question is almost always, "what?". What does it mean to "live in reverent fear?". Perhaps the best way to begin to answer that is to examine what it does not mean, and given the call to "prepare your minds for action" it seems highly unlikely that the exhortation to "live in reverent fear" does not mean to become paralyzed in terror, afraid to do anything in case it's wrong – and if you think that's not a common reaction, hear it expressed instead as, "we can't do that ... we've never done it that way before!" The 'fear' in this command is probably better understood as awe, respect, honour, not terror or panic or worry.

"Worshipful respect" is one way to hear the 'what' in terms we understand today, and that certainly fits the next part of Peter's encouragement, as he goes on to define exactly what that living looks like. "Love one another deeply (constantly) from the heart", he tells us. If you would call yourself one of God's children, love one another deeply from the heart. Ah, there's where the minds will have to start gearing up for work! That's such a simple rule to hear, such a difficult rule to live, because it requires thinking about what it means in every context of life. What does that kind of love look like? What does it mean I actually have to do? No simple yes/no rules to fall back on – waahhh!

Yes, it is more difficult to have to decide what to do to "live love" in every context – living that way requires us to examine our every thought, our every word, our every action to see if they are consistent with 'loving deeply from the heart', and that's tough work. But think also of the possibilities. Imagine what the world would be like if that's how everybody operated. Issues that today seem impossible to overcome would be reconciled in mutually agreeable ways. I know, I know, that sounds too Polly-Anne-ish, and naïve. But think how good life would be even if our whole city behaved that way, loving one another deeply from the heart. Racism, family feuds, neighbour disputes all a thing of the past. Too good to ever be true? Maybe. But imagine the possibilities if everyone in a congregation lived that way, loving one another deeply from the heart – what a vital, life-giving 'if' that would be, especially if we made it come true. Can you imagine the excitement, the impact on our community if we completely that way? It would be such a loving place that we couldn't help but have to put our minds to work to figure out new ways to express that love – we would have to reach out into the community to find new 'others' to love deeply. As others responded to that love, and joined us in also calling themselves children of God, we would be moved to come up with new and creative ways to reach out in love – new ministries of caring, helping, of proclaiming in loving action the gracious, life-giving, life-renewing word of God. If we who call ourselves children of God could actually live in worshipful respect, living love deeply and constantly from the heart, all this would not only be possible, but a reality.

That's a big 'if' – that's a vital 'if' – but we can dream, we can pray, "if only..."