

“For the Unrighteous” – 1Pe 3:13-22

We’re taking another look at the Epistle called 1st Peter this morning for several reasons. The first, and possibly least important reason, is that it is one of the scripture readings suggested in the Lectionary for this the sixth Sunday of Easter. The second reason that I’m basing my message on this text is that it is not the reading from John’s gospel – not that John’s gospel is unimportant or irrelevant, but it is very, very familiar to both you and me and I thought something fresh might be in order. But perhaps the most important reason is that buried in the midst of Peter’s exhortations to moral Christian behaviour are a few theological gems that need to be brushed off and highlighted.

Recall that this letter was written to very early Christians scattered throughout the northern part of Asia Minor – what is now Turkey and Greece. Clearly they were not having an easy time; indeed they were being persecuted for their beliefs, for their Christian faith which had called them to behave differently both from the people around them and from their own previous ways of life. They were being singled out and subjected to both pressures and pains – economic, political, social, and physical. Starting with the Emperor Nero and descending to the lowest levels of the Roman realm an attitude of fear and loathing had soaked into the fabric of life all across the empire, and these upstart Christians were the focus of the hatred.

One of the sad realities of human social behaviour is that people – in general, not necessarily as individuals – react badly to those who do not conform to social norms. People who act differently from, or worse yet the opposite of, the way that all or most others in a society act and behave are almost always singled out for “corrective action.” Those “corrections” range from subtle shunning to the worst of human holocausts, and every sort of nasty mistreatments in between. Sometimes the differences in behaviour are culturally based, or race-based, in which case the identifications are clearly visible; other times all that is needed is a covert whisper to “the authorities” to cause great pain, suffering, and even death to ‘others.’ It seems clear from this letter to the faithful that they were experiencing some or all of these atrocities.

The same human drama of persecution is still playing out around the world today. Whether it is Christians being killed in Pakistan or Egypt, or Muslims in Serbia, or rival tribes being raped and mutilated in Africa, the human reaction of fear and loathing to anyone who seems different runs just under the surface in all cultures. Often those reactions are closely coupled with raw greed, and it is not long after the “others” have been either killed or sent off to internment camps in the Interior that their goods and property are divided among the persecutors (kind of reminds you of the soldiers divvying up Jesus’ few possessions at the foot of the cross, doesn’t it?)

And before we Canadians puff ourselves up with pride that such behaviours are either rare or non-existent here we should take note of what is really happening. In the paper a couple of days ago I noticed a letter pointing out how Christians, particularly those who label themselves ‘evangelical’, increasingly find it more difficult to practice their faith in a society with ever-more-numerous laws prohibiting displays of faith symbols and mention of Christ in public prayers. If you disagree with my assessment here, there is a simple but somewhat dangerous test you could try – go to any street corner, and read aloud from a book. If you choose a novel or even Shakespeare you will likely get some odd looks from people who think it is a gag or sales come-on of some sort. However, if you should decide to read aloud from the Bible I’m pretty certain it won’t be long before you are in a heated argument with several people (which incidentally is the start of a mob!) Mistreatments if not persecutions for religious, cultural, and racial differences are still just under the surface even in Canadian society, as any Quebecois in B.C. or any Anglo in rural Quebec can attest!

But back to the letter called 1st Peter in which the author offered encouragement to the faithful who were being persecuted for their faith, and in doing so provides a few gems of theological insight. One of those gems is hope: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” he exhorts them, revealing his assumption and certainty that they do indeed have hope within them. With this imprecation he implicitly reassures them that their situation is not hopeless, and that they should not respond or react with the same fear as that of their oppressors. In the previous verse, for example, the Greek reads, “do not fear their fear” which really invokes images of fears so similar they are shared. He also gives as a foundation for not fearing the encouragement to “in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord” which we may find a bit confusing since we usually take ‘sanctify’ to mean ‘make holy’ and how can we make Christ, the Holy One, holy? The Greek word ἀγιάσατε (angiasate) here is used more like “take as holy” in the sense of “revere as holy” and so the encouragement is clearer as “in your hearts revere Christ as Lord”

In responding to the faithful who must have been wondering why bad things were happening to good people, Peter here attempts to answer the unanswerable question by pointing out that not only does it happen but even to the very best of the best. “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” he asks, and the wise among us will nod sadly noting that there are many who will harm those who are not only eager to do good but who actually do it. There’s even an expression in our language that exposes the underlying contempt – “those do-gooders!” Even more strongly, however, Peter here points out that the best of the best, Christ Jesus, was brutally killed for his good works that offended not only the religious and secular powerful but also the ordinary citizens as well.

But more than merely an example of suffering for doing good, Peter presents Christ here as the very foundation of the hope of Christian faithful, for not only did he suffer and die for sins once and for all, he rose victorious over death – and sin. And in this affirmation lies one of the brightest theological gems of all – that this saving action by the Righteous One was “for the unrighteous.” Not only for those who have managed to stay pure, not only for those who have in their own strength conquered temptations, not only for the religious elite, but it was for the unrighteous that Christ suffered, and died, and rose again to sit at the right hand of God. It was for you and for me also.

Therein lies our hope as well. There is the foundation that enables us to avoid fearing the fears of those who see us as different because of our faith. But in order for them to see us as different, we need to be different. Where our society increasingly calls for retribution and revenge calling it justice, we need to call for rehabilitation and reconciliation. Where our society increasingly cuts assistance to those who need it most and rewards those who need it least, we need to urge our leaders to reaffirm dignity and value of life through providing housing for the homeless, medical aid for the suffering, and assistance to those whose financial struggles seem both endless and hopeless.

These were not popular moves two thousand years ago when this letter was written. They are increasingly less popular moves today as our society moves ever more towards a philosophy of merit and away from a theology of grace. It will become ever more difficult and ever more challenging to live a life that places us at risk of being persecuted for our beliefs, and yet it will also become ever more important and urgent. May God grant us the peace and strength to live our lives in ways that are pleasing to our Lord, Jesus Christ, as we gather round His table, and as we invite others to do so also.