**1 Peter 3:13-22**

**Holding fast in the faith when times get tough**

We are carrying on our study of 1 Peter this morning and moving on to a section of this wonderful letter that considers our need to stay faithful to Christ, loyal to the Christian faith, even when it is difficult for us to do so. If you want to follow the passage with me, you’ll find it on page 251 in the New Testament, the second half, of our pew Bibles.

Staying faithful to Christ can be real tough when life gets difficult. Sometimes life throws us a curve ball and we really can’t make sense of the Christian faith in the light of what has happened to us. And sometimes, other people may give us a really hard time for being a Christian: friends, family, work colleagues, our employers may not make it easy for us - and the temptation is either to stay quite about our faith or give up on it altogether.

And Peter’s letter gives us some real encouragement if that is how we feel.

And he begins in verse 13 by giving hope to believers who are suffering for their faith: “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?”

The word that Peter uses here for ‘eager’ is a strong word in the Greek: zealots for what is good. Of course, zealots have received a bad press over the course of Christian history; a reference to the Pharisees or religious people who have oppressed through their passion. But the word itself is actually a fairly neutral one and we are called to be zealous for the right things rather than the wrong things: zealous for truth and piety, zealous for justice and here, zealous for what is good.

And Peter is anxious to encourage his readers as they pursue what is good and true and just, verse 14: “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated”. As Christians, holding fast to our faith in Jesus, there may well be times when we feel intimidated and misunderstood but Peter urges us to hold fast and stand for what we know to be true. Despite the probability of being so misunderstood, as Peter says in verse 15, we are to “in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord”.

And not only are we to revere Christ even before those who misunderstand us but also, as he goes on to say, “always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.”

Here is the positive response that is called on us as Christians; that we are to continue speaking out the faith, despite any opposition we might face, to declare Christ to an unbelieving and sometimes hostile world.

And, of course, what is unique about our Christian faith, as Peter rightly notes here, is the hope that is ours. We are to speak out boldly about the hope we have as Christians; that God goes with us through our lives and will always be here for us.

We must never be shy to share the Gospel with others. But Peter is absolutely sure that the guiding principle for us in sharing the Gospel must always be respect, love and compassion. So he goes on in verse 16 to say that when we give an account of the hope, we must do so, “with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear…” The sense here is that we must show respect to others as we speak to them but always remember that we are in the presence of God and accountable to him. Peter says in verse 16, “Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.”

And Peter concludes this section with the observation in verse 17 that, “It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.”

In this passage, we are urged to share the Good News of Jesus - even when we may be misunderstood, even when we may feel intimidated or fearful of the consequences. It is hard to do that – but we know that God understands how hard it is for us because he too has experienced misunderstanding in the person of Jesus Christ - and Peter reminds us of that in verse 18: “For Christ also suffered…” But Peter is very careful that we mustn’t push the comparison too far, so he says that Christ suffered “once for all” and he reminds us that, unlike us, Christ suffered “for sins”: our sins, not his own, because as Peter goes on to say “the righteous for the unrighteous…”

And then he goes on to make this really important point: “in order to bring you to God”. Now this is really important because so many people come to faith and somehow stop at Christ, as if he is the end in itself. In John’s Gospel, Jesus called himself the Gate. Here in Peter, the ‘gate-nature’ of Jesus is made explicit: we go through Jesus to God the Father. Experiencing the fatherhood of God is the end destination; living in relationship with Jesus is not the end destination: our relationship with Jesus is the gate through which we travel to get to the Father.

If we see a relationship with Jesus as being the end result of faith, then we miss the true riches of the Christian faith, which is being adopted as children of our Father God. Peter makes that explicit: Jesus died for us so that he might bring us to God.

And, of course, that is not a once and for all act: we are spending a whole lifetime coming to God as we journey through our time on earth and, on the other side of the grave, we will continue journeying into the heart of God for all eternity - never fully arriving at the destination as we continue to move into his glorious presence.

And, of course, that has been made possible for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, as Peter points out in verse 18: “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit”.

And then we come to this fascinating section, verses 19-20: “In which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water.”

What on earth is going on here? These verses seem so strange and out of place that its hard to make top or tail from them.

Now, these verses have been interpreted in so many different ways over the centuries but we need to break them down a bit to understand what Peter is saying. And there’s three questions to ask about these verses:

Who are the spirits in prison?

What did Christ proclaim to them?

And where did this take place?

First, then, who are these spirits in prison?

Well, Peter is clearly influenced in this passage by another Jewish writing called 1 Enoch that didn’t find its way into our Bible. And, in 1 Enoch, ‘the spirits’ are always a reference to unclean spirits. So it is fairly safe to assume that Peter is referring to unclean spirits here.

Second, what did Christ proclaim? Given the fact that this is something that happened in the light of the resurrection, it is likely that the proclamation is Jesus announcing his Lordship over all creation; even over the unclean spirits.

Thirdly, where did this proclamation take place? Peter uses the phrase, “he went and made a proclamation…”: but where did he go? Well, we shouldn’t make too much out of this phrase because it seems to be a colloquialism; a bit like when we say, “he went and made a fool of himself” or “he went and kicked the football against the wall” or “he went and ate all the biscuits”. It doesn’t refer to a geographical movement so much as a phrase to determine activity.

So Christ has proclaimed his Lordship wherever unclean spirits may be found. He has violated the sanctuary, the refuge where unclean spirits think they are safe, and has proclaimed his Lordship amongst them. And the idea of this happening in the days of Noah is reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24, where he uses that as an analogy of the present age in which we live.

So in the light of all this, it seems that Peter has developed a metaphor here. His idea is simply this: the resurrection of Jesus Christ announces his Lordship over all creation; there is nowhere for unclean spirits to take refuge: wherever they seek to evade God, Christ will come to them and pronounce his Lordship over them. This is God’s creation and Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords - and it is in that truth that we stand and no amount of suffering or persecution or false accusation can remove us from that truth.

That is our inheritance and is our salvation, as Peter goes on to suggest as he extends the metaphor in verse 21: “And baptism, which this prefigures, 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.” I don’t think Peter is making too much of the water metaphor here; he doesn’t want us to think of the flood as a sort of precursor to baptism! I think he is just drawing a link in our minds between the ark which saved us from the flood, with the idea that we are saved through the waters of baptism.

And Peter concludes his thinking by drawing us back to the authority and Lordship of this resurrected Christ, verse 22: “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him”. Peter reiterates the point here that the authority of the resurrected Christ is universal over all creation. Just as the unclean spirits are subject to his authority, so is every other being in the spiritual and physical realm; angels, authorities and powers.

Here, these early Christians were facing the possibility of persecution and they needed to know that they were safe and secure in their profession of faith and in the hands of an almighty and powerful God. And in this passage, Peter gives them the assurance they need; and the assurance we need:

Each one of us faces the possibility of being intimidated or being misunderstood as we share the faith with other people. But each one of us needs to be prepared to stand firm in the faith and be prepared to give an account for our faith if it is demanded of us.

And if we do that, we can be assured that we will be safe and secure in the loving arms of God and in the strength of our Saviour, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords, who has all power and authority in heaven and on earth; and through whom we access to God the Father.

This is the good news of the Gospel: and we can stand firm in it.