

5th Sunday of Lent, 29nd March

1st Peter 3:13-4:6 Confident in Witness

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough

time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

First Thoughts

They pop up online all the time nowadays – customer service chat boxes. Whether you're researching a new bike, working out how to invest your pennies, or choosing a hotel in Tenerife (or Tenby), you've probably had one of those little boxes pop up offering you a 'chat' with a member of staff. Proactive companies know potential customers often have questions. They know they may not discover these answers all by themselves. Or, worse still, they'll discover the answers on a competitor's website! Good customer service agents do their best to understand what it is you want to know, then provide you with the relevant information in a clear and easy to understand way. When the agent has answered your question(s), they may ask if there is anything else they can help you with, and they may suggest some next steps. The best of them do all this in a personable and non-pushy way. Of course, this session isn't about engaging with 'potential customers' in the hope they'll 'buy our products or services'. But it is about how we can respond well when those on our frontlines ask us questions about our faith in Jesus.

1. Think of a time someone asked you about your faith. What did you say? How did they respond?
2. Why was fear an issue for Peter's readers?
3. He tells them to have a reason for their hope - what reason(s) would you give? How should we do this?
4. In what way is living a Christian life a form of witness?
5. How should God's judgement shape how we live?
6. How could you grow in your witness?

Persecution and Suffering

Peter - and the Bible - has a lot to say about suffering. They are realistic about it, and don't try to dismiss it.

Persecution was widespread in Peter's day, and it was very real, but Peter helps us to see a purpose in it (eg 2:12; 3:15).

It could even purify their faith (1:6-7).

Suffering wouldn't last forever. We have to see it in the light of Christ. He himself suffered, so it should be no surprise that we, as his followers, also do (4:12). This is all for a time, until Christ comes as judge and reveals his glory (1:6; 5:10; 4:5-7, 13; 5:10).

Suffering can also strengthen us in faith. Instead of seeking revenge or retaliation, we are to rejoice, to glorify Christ, and to stand firm in the faith (3:13,19; 4:13; 5:9).

EMILY'S STORY

Holes in the wall, stains on the carpets, and mouldy plates piled up next to the sink. People were constantly in and out. If you wanted to sleep, you somehow had to drift off with drum and bass music pounding through the wall. Casual sex, excessive drinking, and recreational drug use were the norm in these halls of residence. During her first year at university, this is where Emily called home.

She was confident though. Confident in the truth and power of the gospel, confident of her identity in Christ, and confident that God could work through her in this place. Though she may not have used this language to describe herself, she saw herself as one of God's 'royal priests'; her life could point others to Jesus.

Living well in this grotty context meant not doing some things. Sleeping around, illicit drugs, and heavy drinking were most definitely off the menu! But living out her identity and purpose meant more than saying 'no' to certain things, it meant saying 'yes' to other things. 'Yes' to caring for friends, 'yes' to having fun, 'yes' to blessing others, 'yes' to sharing Jesus. On a few

occasions, people accused Emily of being boring, a killjoy. But in the face of Emily's kind and joyous life, their words rang hollow. Everyone knew Emily made their lives better.

Anna was one such person. A 'work hard, party hard' kind of girl, Anna had never given serious thought to Christian faith. As far as she was concerned, all religions were basically the same... and she needed none of them. Yet there was something about the life Emily lived, and the Jesus she talked about that Anna couldn't dismiss. She'd ask Emily questions, read things Emily gave her, ask more questions. Emily bought Anna a Bible, which she began to read, and she would sometimes go to church with Emily too. Just before Christmas in their second year, Emily sensed it was the moment to invite Anna to follow Jesus. By the end of the holidays, via a visit to a local church, Anna had surrendered to Jesus' love. When she came back the following term, everyone could see something significant had changed in her life, and it was eventually through Anna that another girl from their house became a Christian. But that's a story for another time.

Hope that Helps

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We're in the most uncertain times for a generation.

Coronavirus may spread quickly, but fear is much more contagious. So, how do we live for and like Jesus when our livelihoods, and potentially even our very lives, are at risk? First Peter (1:3) talks of a 'new birth into a living hope'.

These words, originally written to a struggling people facing all kinds of trials, still encourage us today. The reality of Christ's ultimate victory over death and disease is our source of hope, empowering us to live distinctively. As light in darkness: joyful in suffering, calm in the storm.

Followers of Jesus have a heritage of doing this. In response to plagues in the Roman Empire, the early church cared for the sick and dying. They had no fear of death, because they knew where their eternal hope lay. We're called to minister gospel-shaped hope that demonstrates Christ's incarnational presence. But how?

The natural temptation is to become self-centred. Panic buy. Stockpile. Look out for yourself and your family. And it's good to care for close relatives, especially those at risk. But Jesus calls us further, to love our neighbour, whoever they may be.

Where those near us are forced inside, we can be first to offer support (if we're able). Ready to post encouragements through doors, call the lonely, collect shopping. Physically distanced, yes. But socially, never closer.

Compassion doesn't stockpile for itself, but ensures stocks are piled high in local Foodbanks by putting items in supermarket collection points. Now schools and workplaces are shut, there are more mouths to feed and less money to

feed them with. We can join mutual aid groups, volunteer for the NHS, or give financially to care for the most vulnerable.

But the motive? Love, not worry. To what extent do our lives testify that the Prince of Peace is sovereign? As Christians, we have access to a hope that nothing else in this world can bring. In a scared world, supernatural *shalom* is a great gift. Let's pray we would be the church that Christ calls us to be, joining his mission to bring heaven to earth. Choosing peace over panic. Hope over hysteria. Faith over fear. And, in our response, may the God who rules over all be glorified.

Prayer:

Pray that you may be a good witness to people you know, and to speak well of Christ.