

“SUFFERING FOR YOUR FAITH”

Introduction

Have you ever experienced suffering because of an injustice? Have ever you been bullied? Have you been the target of abusive language and you left standing – why did that happen? Have you ever been given a hard time because of your faith?

Today’s Epistle reading from 1st Peter gives insight to ‘suffering’ and this will be the text I will be examining in the sermon this morning:

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen

The Apostle Peter is writing to a people who are facing persecution. As a result, many were experiencing various degrees of suffering for being followers of the Messiah – Jesus Christ!

*¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts, reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you yet do it with **gentleness and reverence**; ¹⁶ and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God’s will, than for doing wrong. 1st Peter 3:13-27*

There are several lines of thought regarding the ‘suffering’ that the people of God are facing. One is opposition from outside the Church. This results in persecution for their faith. The second one, is from within the Body of Christ. This may sound strange; yet it is not so much persecution for their belief but rather how they were expressing their belief.

Those who are the cause of this suffering were possibly working out of a great sense of superiority. Remember the early Church sprang out of Judaism, with all its customs and regulations etc. Under the direction of God, the Church had now grown in to incorporate Gentiles who were not from a Judaic background. Hence the possibility of tension within the Body of Christ.

Regardless, if those who are causing the suffering are from within or outside the Church, under God the Apostle Peter directed those suffering to:

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,¹⁵ but in your hearts, reverence Christ as Lord.

The Apostle Peter is not using the power of positive thinking, and he is not denying the reality of their suffering. The Apostle Peter is directing them to take their suffering to the LORD.

In the midst of the suffering, he is calling them not to yield to the temptation of allowing their hearts to be filled with bitterness. For this may lead yield to the temptation of seeking revenge.

No, Peter calls Christ's disciples to know the reality that Jesus is LORD. And allowing that truth to permeate throughout their very being.

This leads to the sentence of Scripture which the lectionary brings to the forefront during the season of Lent which the majority of theologians call '**The Mission of Jesus**'.

(verse 18) For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

The Apostle Peter reminds both the original hearers and everyone who has read this passage; that Jesus sufferings also involved unjust suffering. There is no doubt the Apostle Peter believed the death of Jesus was a substitutionary atonement.

As we humbly approach this verse, you and I can rightly acknowledge it led to the death of our own sins, and our rising to newness of life in Christ. Or to state it another way, we have been reconciled to God the Father through the substitutional death of Jesus on the Cross.

There is no doubt Jesus' death upon the cross is the outstanding proof that sufferings are purposeful.

Friends, when Christians suffer injustice, they are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong.

Verse 17, may at first glance seem at least odd, if not uncomfortable:

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong.

As you and I know, the world has been fractured by sin, resulting in cruelty and persecution being a reality.

God in his Faithful Love, His Grace, continues to assist those who may be suffering for their belief that Jesus is Lord. What does the LORD assisting, look like?

Yesterday, news from Nigeria was reported by the mainstream news outlets regarding the kidnapping of students by radicals in Nigeria. What was omitted in their reports was the school involved was a Christian School.

You may know, various Christian Schools, Churches, and property owned by Nigerian Christians have endured systematic attack for years. Some, Nigerian Christians, are being persecuted because of their public affirmation that Jesus is Lord.

We can all ponder – when LORD will this cease? Or join the cry for the martyrs as recorded in the book of Revelation.

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; ¹⁰ they cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” (Revelation 6:9-10 RSV)

We may not always understand why the LORD has intervene: I will now share a Testimony from a brother Clergy friar who I made my associate when I was the Rector of Traralgon in the Diocese of Gippsland.

He was one of the “lost boys” from Sudan:

He shared many times how the militants came into his village. When the slaughter began, he and his siblings were told by his parents to run – and they did. Eventually they found themselves in a humanitarian camp. They both thank God for providing a Christian man who looked out for them. This man continued to teach them about the Christian faith as his parents had. This went on for many years. This man was like a father to them. He was a Bishop.

Eventually growing up in the camp he went to another camp searching for his family. My friend was shocked the day when he had walked into another humanitarian camp to see one of the leaders who had caused such carnage in his village all those years before.

This man, recognizing my friend came to him, and fell to his knees asking for forgiveness. Since the horrific crimes this man had become a Christian.

My colleague, struggled, but did learn to forgive him. The man who causes great persecution in their lives now supported both him and his brother through their formal studies.

This Priest Associate and many of the members of the Sundanese congregation, do not rejoice in the 30-year war in their country— yet they genuinely gave thanks acknowledging how God brought good out of such sufferings by bringing them to faith.

You and I may face ridicule and suffer because we are Christians. Albeit not in the same degree as those in the African content. There are Christians in Australia who have also suffered because of their faith in Christ.

The reading of second part of verse 15 is important for all Christians no matter where they live:

Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you yet do it with gentleness and reverence; (15b)

We are living in a time where many in our society may not have had a Christian upbringing. They may be confused to what is meant by the Good News of God. The challenge has always been before the Christian Church of proclaiming the gospel so hearts can be turned to God.

(verse 18) For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

How the Christian Church proclaims that message is to be done **with gentleness and reverence**.

Yes, ***gentleness and reverence for Christ***, is the underpinning of all our efforts in the proclamation for the Good News.

This week, if you are suffering for your faith, please let me know so I can pray and support you. More importantly continue to look to Christ.

Secondly as the body of Christ at St John's Gordon I would encourage you to ponder; What is the defence you would make if anyone called you to give account for the hope that is in you?

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

To God be glory for ever:

References:

- i. Michael Eaton, 1st Peter
- ii. Bishop Paul Barnett, 1st Peter