

Easter 6 / May 14, 2023

1 Peter 3:18

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.”

Peter begins our text saying, “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for God? But even if you suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy.” In this letter Peter speaks about two things; our obedience to the governing authorities as instituted by God and our obedience to God. Christians are obligated to respect public servants as agents of God, given for the peace and security of the land. Public servants are to see themselves as accountable to God for their actions. Believers are to obey the laws of the state, in so far as they do not conflict with the commands of God. Even when Christians must obey God rather than the governing authorities, they are to respectfully disagree and suffer the consequences without resistance, entrusting our selves to God and His grace. Peter writes, “always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you, yet do it with gentleness and respect.” The apostles never promoted, encouraged or in any way countenanced what today would be called ‘civil disobedience.’

At a time when governing authorities were condemning the gospel and actively persecuting Christians, Peter wrote, “Fear God. Honour the emperor.” Even if the emperor was an evil person, a persecutor of Christians, the emperor’s position was to be honoured for the sake of God who entrusted it to him. Peter was not alone in saying this. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God.” In his first letter to Timothy Paul said, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour.” We witness to our faith in Christ and God’s desire that all be saved through Him, by our obedience to the ruling authorities and the laws of the land and by making a good witness to Christ the Saviour and our faith in Him. We remember in our sufferings that Christ suffered to bring us to God!

Earlier in this letter Peter said, “It is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.” In chapter four Peter said, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evil doer... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” We obey the laws of the land because they are instituted by God through earthly rulers, so we may live quiet and peaceful lives. We obey the laws of the land as far as they do not conflict with the laws of God. We refuse to submit to any law or command of the governing authorities that denies God, violates His image by abusing human dignity or that seeks to suppress His worship and His word. Even when we refuse to submit to unjust laws we do so with gentleness and respect, seeking to bring others to Christ through our words and witness, so He may bring them to God through faith in Him as God and Saviour.

First century Christians honoured the emperor and his governors, but they would not worship the state gods or take part in community religious rituals. First century Christians honoured the emperor, acknowledged his authority and showed allegiance to the Roman state by their good conduct, but they would not obey the command to worship the emperor as a son of the gods. They would not submit to a command that was against God’s word and God had said, “You shall have no other gods before me.” They did not submit, but they did not rebel against the authority in general, or in any way seek to undermine the state and overthrow the emperor. They suffered for the sake of their faith in Christ, knowing they would be blessed for His sake. Christ also suffered unjustly, that we would be brought to God through baptism into His death and resurrection and by faith in His Name.

No one suffered more unjustly than Christ. He broke no human law, yet He was condemned as a law breaker. He fulfilled the laws of God, yet He was crucified as a blasphemer of God’s name. He suffered the greatest injustice, but at no time did he protest the violation of His rights. He submitted to the mighty hand of God who worked to accomplish His good, despite the malice of the religious authorities and the miscarriage of justice that was brought upon Him because the governor, recognizing His innocence, nevertheless found it more expedient that one man should die, even though unjustly, than that a riot should break out during Passover and he himself should be blamed. Jesus did not protest or encourage rebellion among His followers. Just the opposite. He told Peter to put away his sword when he thought to defend Him when He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. He could have prayed and His Father would have sent legions of angels to His defense. But, He submitted to the injustice of death on the cross and through it bore human sin, so that through Him and faith in His name, we would come to God.

Peter wants believers to submit to God's will in Christ, even if it means suffering unjustly in testimony to our faith in Him. First century believers were not trouble makers, insurrectionists or disturbers of the peace. They were not urban terrorists. They were good citizens of the Roman state and sought the well being of their communities. They sought to live quiet and peaceful lives in worship of God in Christ. They did not return evil for evil. When persecuted they blessed. When treated unjustly they forgave. In the spirit of St. Paul's words in the letter to the Romans, they were not overcome by evil but overcame evil with good. Most importantly, through their good behaviour and words of witness, they proclaimed the good-news of God's love in Christ offered in forgiveness for all to receive; given fully and freely to all who believe in His holy name and receive baptism into His death and resurrection.

In fact, it was the Christian obedience to the authorities in so far as it did not violate God's word and their willing submission to unjust suffering related to things that were commanded in God's word that promoted the spread of the gospel and facilitated the great increase in the number of believers in the first three centuries of the New Testament era. The Roman governments and citizens eventually recognized the good behaviour of Christian communities and their loyalty to the emperor and empire as political entities under God. Non believers were impressed and intrigued by the willingness of Christians to suffer hardship, imprisonment, torture and death for the sake of their faith in Christ. They realized that there was something truly divine in a faith that inspired such allegiance to God and quietly accepted suffering at the hand of the governing authorities. Many unbelievers became believers, embraced the faith they once rejected and were brought to God in Christ, because of the witness of Christians who testified to Christ and the salvation God offers all to receive through Him. Christians who suffered for the sake of righteousness were blessed by God in their sufferings. They became a blessing because others came to faith because of their sufferings.

To this end, Peter calls us to see Christ in our sufferings and to witness Him to others through our words and actions. In His cross He draws us close to His heart in love and empowers us to bear the crosses laid upon. It is a gracious thing to see God in our sufferings. To this end, Peter calls us to seek Christ in the word; written, given in the water of baptism and under the forms of bread and wine in holy communion. When faced with a negative response because of our faith in Christ, he says, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." Even as Christ suffered the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God, we are blessed and empowered by the Spirit of Christ to bring God to others through our words and witness, so they too may come to faith in Christ and come to God through Him. God bless us both to believe in Christ as Saviour and to share Him with others. In Jesus' Name. Amen