

Sunday 27th June 2021

1 Peter 4:12-19 (Be committed)

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Betty Friend (read by Sue Miller)

Good morning and welcome to St Johns on-line reflection. Today, we will be focusing on 1 Peter 4:12-19. First, Sue will read the prayers, written by Betty.

Let us pray:

Our almighty and loving father, we thank and praise you for your un-numbered blessings and acknowledge that we can do nothing in our own strength. We thank you for the gift of Jesus who died for our sins, and the Holy Spirit who guides our lives. You know every hair on our heads, and in confidence we bring our prayers to you.

We pray for our world where millions of people are living in fear as a result of war, unjust regimes, famine or flood, causing many refugees to leave their homes in the hope of finding safety. Lord have mercy on those who are suffering and those who have been bereaved.

We particularly pray for our Christian brothers and sisters who are being persecuted, thinking of North Korea, China, Pakistan and various countries in Africa. We think especially of those Christians in Northern Burkina Faso where Jihadists have moved into this country from Mali, causing death and destruction leading to Christians fleeing for safety. We thank you for the work of missionaries and aid workers. We pray too for the peace of Jerusalem.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

We ask your hand of protection on our own country where the Judeo/Christian foundations on which this country is built are gradually being eroded, with laws being enacted which contradict your laws. We pray that Christians in Parliament and in positions of authority will speak out to uphold Your truth. We pray for our Queen, and for all her faithful years of service, and for her deep faith in You. There is still much unrest in Northern Ireland, and we ask that you will raise up leaders who are able to bring the two opposing sides together and let them live in Your peace. We ask that the problems of social care will be sorted satisfactorily and that the problems of homelessness, poverty, bad housing and children's welfare will be at the forefront of the government's agenda. We thank you for our welfare state and our national health service, which, far from being perfect, is a great blessing.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

We ask your protection on our community of Penge. We thank you for our councillors,

emergency services, doctors, nurses, council workers, and all those who are working to make Penge a pleasant place to live.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

We pray for St. John's, soon to be merged with Holy Trinity. We ask that the transition will go smoothly and that the merged church will be a beacon of your light in Penge. We thank you that the interview day went well, and that a preferred candidate has been identified. We thank you for answered prayer. Help us to make the new incumbent feel welcome, and help the congregations to ensure that they will not feel overwhelmed by the task ahead; we all have something to offer. We thank you for the services we can offer in your name: Living Well, Amaze Penge, the C.A.P. centre, Food Bank and the connections we have in the area.

We also pray that it will not be too long before we can sing your praises in church and that we will be able to re-open Little and Big Fish. We remember those who are sick and ask your healing on Will, your continuing healing on Val, for healing for Val and Hazel's feet, for Maria as she waits news on a course of treatment and for Audrey's hip. Thank you that Andy is now out of hospital; please keep him well.

Let us take a moment to remember those known to us who are in need of God's healing and peace.

Lord, help us to move forward in Your name to bring the gospel to our families, communities and further afield. We praise and glorify your name and offer these prayers in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Let us now join together in the prayer that Jesus taught us:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.**

Amen.

Reading

Our reading today is taken from 1 Peter, Chapter 4, verses 12-19. New International Version (NIV)

Suffering for Being a Christian

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And,

“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Talk

The theme from today's reading is 'be committed'. It's one thing for us to be committed to God when things are going well, but how are we in the face of suffering, of persecution?

Peter reminds his readers in his letter that they should not be surprised when they suffer. It is likely that generally the early Christians would not have been surprised by opposition, but at this time they were encountering a particularly painful trial, in verse 12 it says a 'fiery ordeal'. This was not the occasional personal persecution from those around them, but official persecution from those above them. Christianity had been tolerated by Rome because it was considered a 'sect' of Judaism, and the Jews were permitted to worship freely, but this attitude was changing and the fires of persecution would be ignited, first by Nero, and then by the emperors that followed. Peter gives the believers some instructions to follow in the light of this coming 'fiery trial'.

Instead of not being surprised by their experiences, Peter's counterproposal is to encourage the people to 'rejoice'. To rejoice in suffering may not have been for the readers then or for us now, a first reaction to suffering, but Peter goes on to say, to '...rejoice in inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed'. God is not going to replace suffering with glory; rather he will transform the suffering into glory. Jesus explained to his disciples that they

should expect opposition and persecution from the world (John 15:17-16:4). But he also gave them an encouraging promise. In the world you will have trouble: but take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33). It was through his death on the cross of Calvary, and his resurrection, that he overcame sin and the world (John 12:23-33). Non-believers may not understand how difficult circumstances can produce exceeding joy, because they have never experienced the grace of God. Our joy depends on Jesus.

In the world today there are many countries facing severe persecution, and whilst our lives may not be threatened, we can still experience some persecution for being a Christian. For example, we may be ignored by people, excluded from informal groups, or receive verbal abuse. We experience such trials because we are faithful to God and stand up for that which is right. It is because we bear the name of Christ that the world attacks us, and there is authority in the name of Jesus. When sinners insult us, they are really persecuting Jesus Christ. (Acts 9:4). When we experience these insults in verse 14 it says, 'you are blessed'.

These words 'you are blessed' also remind us of Jesus' words in the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you. 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me'. (Matt 5:11). To be insulted because one belongs to Christ is to be blessed by God. Peter says 'you are blessed for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you'. In these situations, the Spirit of glory, the Holy Spirit, rests upon believers in an especially powerful way. It is the same Spirit that rested on Jesus (Isa 11:2, Matt 3:16) who now rests upon the believer. Christ sends his Spirit to strengthen those who are persecuted for their faith.

Unfortunately, not all our suffering is the result of doing right things. There are some difficulties that we bring on ourselves because of disobedience and sin. Peter warns his readers in verse 15 that they should not be suffering as 'a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler'. In their context of extreme opposition, it would also have made things much worse for them. Peter is saying our suffering is to be because we have done right, and not wrong. In the context of Peter's readers living in the first century Mediterranean society there was an honour-shame culture, where an 'insult' was much more than a form of criticism. Whilst criticisms can be deflected; being shamed, however irreparably damaged one's social standing. This is why in verse 16, Peter writes 'Do not be ashamed'. The Christians would need to learn to cope with the loss of social standing (whatever their social level) involved with conversion and consistent living. Rather than take these insults personally, Peter's readers are to take them as an occasion to see that they are blessed. Suffering shame for Jesus is to be understood as a test to prepare us for God's final judgement. Peter may have drawn this theme from Jewish eschatology (theology) wherein persecution was connected to the final age as a preparatory device, understanding that our suffering is one way God prepares us to be fit for his presence. When Peter and John were persecuted for preaching the Good News, they rejoiced because such persecution was a mark of God's approval of their work (Acts

5:41). Whilst we are not to seek out suffering, persecution is our context and should never become our complex, but also we are not to try to avoid suffering. Instead, we are to keep on doing what is right whether or not it brings suffering. We must learn to put aside peer pressure, and what others think and care only about what God thinks.

Towards the end of the passage Peter talks about judgment. In verse 17 it says 'for it is time for judgement to begin with God's household' i.e. his people. Judgement beginning with God's house alludes to Ezek9:1-6 and Mal3:1-4, where the Lord purifies his people. Judgement here is not punitive, however, but purifying and cleansing. Persecution is a type of suffering Christians are called to as part of the purifying process. The suffering of God's people refines them (1 Peter 1: 6-7) and gets rid of the sin in their lives. The holiest, most loving person is still someone who needs to be rescued. This reflection is not meant to produce panic, but rather gratitude. God can allow believers to sin and then experience their consequences. He does this for several reasons: 1) to show us our potential for sinning, 2) to encourage us to turn from sin and more constantly depend on him, 3) to prepare us to face other, even stronger temptations in the future, and 4) to help us stay faithful and keep on trusting him. If believers need earthly discipline (judgement) from God, how much more will unbelievers receive it? If it is hard for the righteous to be saved (only because of God's mercy), how will it be for those who reject Christ?

With this in mind, we are called to be concerned about those around us who do not yet know Christ and it is in such times of persecution that give opportunity for a loving witness to those who persecute us. In Matthew 5: 43-44 it says 'You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy, But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven.' As Christians, we do not seek for vengeance on those who have hurt us. Rather, we pray for them and seek to lead them to Jesus Christ. It was not the earthquake that brought the Philippian jailer to Christ because it frightened him almost to death. No, it was Paul's loving concern for him that brought him to faith in Christ. When careless or cruel people hurt us, sometimes irreparably, we can hate forever or we can trust God, but we can't do both. Martin Luther King said 'I have decided to stick *with love*. Hate is too great a burden to bear.' God is with us even in the worst situation - always with a promise, always with hope.

At the beginning of the talk we started with the words 'be committed' and here in the last verse it says 'those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.' To be committed to him, is to entrust our lives entirely to him. We do this by committing ourselves into the care of God. Everything else that we do as Christians depends on this. We are valuable to God. He made us, redeemed us, lives in us, guards, and protects us. Our commitment is not a single action but a constant attitude. By us committing to God we obey him and trust in him – in good times and bad, Trust overcomes fear and trust overcomes hate.

How do we do this? 'By means of well-doing'. It means bringing fresh goodness, fresh love, fresh kindness, fresh wisdom into the community, into the family, to the people we

meet on the streets in Penge. We are saying to God, 'I trust you, this is what you have called me to do, this is what I am doing with the life you've given me, even though I am facing suffering. I will continue to be this sort of person, to your glory'. If we really have hope, and believe that Jesus is coming again, then we will obey his Word and start laying up treasures and glory in heaven. Unsaved people have a present that is controlled by their past, but Christians have a present that is controlled by the future. In Philippians 3:13-14 it says. Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. In our very serving, we are committing ourselves to God and making investments for the future.

To close the last verse (v19) of today's passage in the MSG version.
'So if you find life difficult because you're doing what God said, take it in stride. Trust him. He knows what he's doing, and he'll keep on doing it.'

Let us pray:

Dear Lord Jesus, in times of persecution, help us to not focus on ourselves, or to retaliate to those causing us hurt, but instead to ever keep our eyes focused on you, to love those you call us to serve, for your name, praise and glory, Amen

Closing Prayer: (Roman- 15:13)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen