

1 Peter 3:8 to 18 Evensong

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Amen.

This evening I'm going to talk about St. Peter's first letter which was directed towards Gentile Christians and we are picking it up at chapter 3 verse 8,

It is clear that his readers are Christians because he wrote, "All of you have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind", which describes a community of people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit trying to live Christian lives.

So let us look at these qualities of the Christian life in a little more detail.

Firstly unity. In Jesus' great prayer recorded in John chapter 17, Jesus prays for all his disciples, that is, all those who believe in him from his day to the present time, that they will be one in unity with each other and be one in unity with Him, who is one in unity with God the Father.

And it isn't only Jesus who says that, St Paul also wrote it to the Romans in chapter 12 where he wrote, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

I believe we have made great progress in the last few years in Sandhurst, in that we now have a fairly strong ecumenical movement in Sandhurst Owlsmoor and Collegetown, with all the churches participating.

We as a church meet regularly with the other churches in College Town and Owlsmoor for prayer and we organise events together.

The last ecumenical service was at St Georges and at coffee afterwards a lady asked me if she could have a lift home since she also lived on the Crowthorne road in Sandhurst.

I said of course I would, and she got in the car and in conversation I found out that she was 105 years old and I dropped her off at the end of her road, because she insisted on walking to her home. I found out that she is a Methodist, and if that's what happens when you become a Methodist then I'm thinking of joining.

Now we shouldn't be too worried about what we perceive as the lack of unity, even in our church we have those who prefer the 8 am service compared to the 9.30, or compared to the family service, because we all worship God in our own way.

Secondly sympathy. In our unity, as I've already said, there will be many Christians who will have totally different personalities, different outlooks on life, different ways of worshipping God, and many other differences.

We must have an understanding of where they are coming from, to have an empathy towards them, not to be judgemental or condemning, just because they are different to us.

Thirdly love. We all need to read and understand St Paul's letter to the Corinthians chapter 13, where St. Paul rightly says that the greatest action we can take at any time is the action of love.

Love is the main ingredient for understanding and for unity, because love is the bond that keeps us all together.

Finally, a tender heart and humble mind from which comes unity, sympathy and love.

There is no aggression, no prideful barriers in a tender heart and humble mind, only sympathy and love for other people. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Verse 5 of the beatitudes.

In verse 9 we are told that under normal circumstances the people St Paul is addressing do live Christian lives, but when they are provoked, St Peter says that they are quite able to repay evil for evil and abuse for abuse.

But St Peter says, "No, because that's your old pagan way of life; now you are to repay them with a blessing, because if you do you will inherit a blessing."

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall inherit the earth." And, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I'm sure it was very difficult for St. Peter to discard his lifetime of Jewishness when becoming a Christian, as we saw at Cornelius' conversion, when God lowered food to him on a blanket, and when he was told to eat, what he considered unclean food.

This experience would have given him an empathy for Christians who were once pagans and who were now trying to give up their old pagan ways of living and embracing Christianity as a new way of life.

And his readers, knowing where St. Peter came from, would know that Peter was writing from personal experience, and his authority of having been where they are and who has successfully made the change, would give them courage knowing that it can be done.

At verse 10, St. Peter quotes psalm 34, which is believed to have been written by King David about the time that he was fleeing from King Saul who was intent of destroying him, but who ended up a captive of king Abimelech, and where David faked insanity to escape him.

The psalm stresses that although he is assailed from every side by evil people he must not become one of them, but will continually praise and seek the Lord at all times who will give him the wisdom to overcome and deliver him from all his fears.

I remember Terry Waite when he was imprisoned in Beirut, saying that one day when he went to the toilet, he found one of the kidnapper' guns which had been left behind.

When he left the toilet he gave it back to one of his captors and said, 'This is yours, that's your way of doing things, not mine'.

And that is precisely what St Peter is saying to all his readers, 'Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but rather repay such people with a blessing'.

What St Peter is recommending isn't easy and requires self control, and courage, similar to the self control and courage shown by Terry Waite throughout his long ordeal in captivity.

From Verse 13, St. Peter points out that it is unlikely that anyone will try to harm you if you are eager to do good, but even if you do suffer for doing Good, God will bless you for it.

St Peter goes on to say, 'do not fear what they fear and don't be intimidated.'

Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

In verse 15 St. Peter refers to the hope that we have in the Lord and asks us always to be prepared to give other people an account and our reason for our hope, because it is that way that we spread the word of God, in the story we tell.

In verse 16 St Paul asks us to give an account of our hope with gentleness and reverence so that they are likely to embrace our hope, rather than be overwhelmed by it and decide that it's too difficult, or not for them.

In verse 17 St Peter says that it is better to suffer doing God's will than to suffer doing the will of the devil, because God's reward for suffering for him is life but the devil's reward for suffering for him is death.

And then verse 18 which is worthy of reading again. “For Christ also suffered for the sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.” “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”

At St Paul's conversion from Judaism to Christianity St Paul was made to suffer blindness, but then the Lord told Ananias to go and lay hands on him so that he may regain his sight, but Ananias didn't want to go because of Paul's reputation in persecuting Christians.

But the Lord said go for I have chosen him, and I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

Suffering is undoubtedly a part of this life, not only for Jesus but also for us, so much so that it cannot be avoided, the question is do we want to suffer for the good of ourselves and other people or do we want to suffer for the destruction of ourselves and other people, I'm for the former.

As we sit let us pray

Help us to repay no one evil for evil, but to be merciful even as you Lord God in heaven are merciful; so that we may continually follow in your way in all that we say and do, so that day by day we may be conformed to your image and likeness. We ask this through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen