

Sharing Christ's Sufferings

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 24th May 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Peter 4:12-5:14 (Part of series on 1 Peter)

Pick your sermon

If I were to ask you to pick a topic for a sermon that you'd like to hear, I wonder what you'd choose? I imagine most people would choose a title that sounded uplifting, particularly if going through a difficult time. Some would choose a topic that they'd like to understand more, or something to help them with their daily lives. I doubt many of you listening would choose a topic like "Sharing Christ's Sufferings".

And yet, as we have been studying the first Letter of Peter, the theme of suffering has been running through it. Peter reminds us that Jesus Christ was "the stone that the builders rejected"¹, that "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps"². "He himself bore our sins in his own body on the cross"³, and "Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God"⁴. Peter is writing to Christians who "have had to suffer various trials"⁵. In chapters 2 he addresses the situation of slaves who may be unjustly beaten⁶, and in chapter 3 he writes of Christians being maligned and abused, suffering for doing right and being called to account for their faith⁷.

And now, in chapter 4 he tells his hearers, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you"⁸. It looks like being a Christian doesn't magically protect you from having a hard time, and may even bring it on. Discipleship is not for the faint-hearted!

Well, if you haven't switched off yet, well done, because it gets better from here.

Facing suffering with hope

Peter doesn't try to tiptoe round the reality of suffering, or pretend it isn't a real experience. In fact, thinking that you're entitled to a trouble-free ride through life is self-delusion. Our bodies are designed to feel pain so that we know to avoid harm. There is no love without the risk of hurt. No one achieves success without experiencing failures on the way. And standing up for what is right is never going to be a walk in the park when there are others who have a vested interest in maintaining exploitation and injustice. Sometimes life is going to be tough. That's

¹ 1 Peter 2:7

² 1 Peter 2:21

³ 1 Peter 2:24

⁴ 1 Peter 3:18

⁵ 1 Peter 1:6

⁶ 1 Peter 2:19f

⁷ 1 Peter 3:13-17

⁸ 1 Peter 4:12

not an unfortunate aberration, it's normal. If we haven't already done so, it's time to get used to it.

But Peter helps us to see the challenges of life in a bigger context: God loves us and has called us to be his own; Jesus died for us and rose again, conquering death and guaranteeing for us "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."⁹ What's the worst that could happen to you? Death? God's got that covered. Even dying is the gateway to glory. The American missionary Jim Elliott, who was killed while trying to bring the gospel to a remote tribe in Ecuador, left behind this quote:

*'He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.'*¹⁰

The Covid19 crisis that we are living through has turned everything upside down. No area of life has been unaffected. The word "unprecedented" lost its impact within a few weeks. The crisis has forced us to rethink our assumptions about how the world should be, or is likely to develop. For some, the business of just surviving from day to day has been all-consuming. But for those who are able to, there is no better time to evaluate what is really important in life. And as Christians, we should ask ourselves, where does our real identity lie? And where is our security? The key to knowing yourself and loving yourself is to know the one who created you. And the key to true security is to trust that God will look after you.

Peter is writing to people who were very likely to suffer merely because they were Christians. There are millions around the world today who are in just that position, especially Christians who are in countries where there is a hostile ideology, such as extremist Islam in Iran or Pakistan, for example, or Communism in China or North Korea. Peter reminds his hearers that "your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering".¹¹ We should be mindful of them in prayer. And perhaps their suffering will put ours in some kind of perspective. These people, who suffer because they belong to Christ, are indeed those who "share in Christ's sufferings".¹² They have reason to rejoice, says Peter, because "the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you."¹³ Those who suffer for their faith should see it not as a disgrace, which is how their enemies see it, but as a badge of honour, a privilege to be called a Christian.

Humility and trust

There is helpful advice for all of us in Peter's letter. One really important thing, says Peter, is to have an attitude of humility. There is nothing that debunks an over-inflated view of ourselves than a bit of suffering. But we needn't wait until disaster cuts us down to size. Peter tells us to clothe ourselves with humility and to humble ourselves "under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time."¹⁴

⁹ 1 Peter 1:4-5

¹⁰ Jim Elliott's story is told by his wife, Elizabeth Elliott in *Through Gates of Splendour*

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:9

¹² 1 Peter 5:13

¹³ 1 Peter 5:14

¹⁴ 1 Peter 5:5-6

Peter's words echo the teaching of Jesus that "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted".¹⁵ Having a realistic view of yourself (and I don't mean putting yourself down) is the key to maintaining good relationships with others and with God.

This God who has a mighty hand is our loving heavenly Father, and we can trust him implicitly. To those who are suffering, Peter promises that "after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you".¹⁶ If God has had his eye on us from before the foundation of the world, and has called us to share his eternal glory, and has given us his Spirit, isn't he worth trusting? So here comes one of my favourite memory verses:

"Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you."¹⁷

It's a sentiment echoed in that popular hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus", where the repeated refrain is "take it to the Lord in prayer".

We all experience anxiety from time to time, often with good reason. But instead of letting it eat away at us, we can do something positive about it: "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." Take it to the Lord in prayer. Nurturing our relationship with God day by day is a sure way of helping us grow closer to him and developing our sense of trust. As Emma reminded us last week, we should "sanctify Christ as Lord" in our hearts. That growing relationship with him will equip us to face whatever life may throw at us.

Another thing we can do is to ask others to pray for us. We're in this together. God never intended us to live the Christian life on our own. We have brothers and sisters in Christ. We can bear one another's burdens¹⁸. Even if we can't at the moment visit in person, we can phone, Zoom or write. Perhaps we can't literally follow Peter's closing instruction to "greet one another with a kiss of love", but we can certainly support and encourage one another.

Running over

I began this series of sermons 4 weeks ago by describing a Larson cartoon that had 4 people trying to decide whether a glass was half full or half empty. What's your glass like?

Peter's message is that when we know the Lord, when we understand what Jesus Christ has done for us in his death and resurrection, when we have come to entrust our lives to God our loving Father and mighty protector, our cup will be not half empty but running over. And that won't depend on external circumstances, which can change unpredictably, but on the love and security which our relationship with God brings.

Let us pray.

¹⁵ Matthew 23:12

¹⁶ 1 Peter 5:10

¹⁷ 1 Peter 5:7

¹⁸ Galatians 6:2

You might like to ask yourself, Where is my identity? Where is my security? Do they lie in knowing God as my heavenly Father?

(silence)

I'm going to use the words of a well-known hymn as a prayer, asking God to help us centre our lives on him.

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind;
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.*

*Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.*

Amen.