

Do the right thing

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?

Think about it for a moment: who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

It seems like the answer should be “No one!” and that’s what we might think in our hearts, but our heads tell us something quite different. Who would harm Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Who would harm Martin Luther King Junior? They both were eager to do what was good, and they were doing good, weren’t they?

So why, in our second reading today, does Peter ask us who will harm us if we’re eager to do good?

It’s a good question.

I’m was fan of Top Gear - Top Gear as it was. From time to time Jeremy, James and Richard were given challenges. Things like turn a car into a space shuttle, drive across Ukraine, build a convertible car and drive it through a safari park, find the source of the Nile in a car worth no more than £5000 or modify a commercial van into a functioning hovercraft. Their standard responses to the challenges were questions to the audience “How hard could it be?” and “What could possibly go wrong?”

Of course, at one level these things were theoretically possible and technically achievable too, but at another level, they were crazy things to do. And after all, if those things were easy, they wouldn’t have made entertaining – and often hilarious - television.

“How hard could it be?”

“What could possibly go wrong?”

They didn’t give answers. But we know what the outcome was likely to be.

And similarly, Peter asks: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?”

In today’s reading from the first letter of Peter, just like last week’s reading from the same letter, there’s an awful lot of ideas: being blessed even if we suffer, revering Christ in our hearts, defending our faith, keeping our conscience clear, being made alive in the spirit, proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, Noah and the ark and the flood, baptism, angels, authorities and powers!

There’s lots of ideas, some of them seem beyond understanding. And yet, here it is as part of the canon of the New Testament. The inspired word of God.

And again, just like last week’s reading, amongst the rush of ideas from Peter in today’s reading, there are gems “*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*” (3:18). Isn’t that the heart of the gospel? What Jesus did – suffering once for all – who he is – the righteous for the unrighteous and why he did it – to bring us to God. This is way up there with John 3:16 – *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...* – as a concise expression of the gospel.

But as I say, it’s packed in amongst a rush of ideas. It pays to slow down, to open up Peter’s writing, and to really appreciate Peter’s faith and passion.

In today’s reading, Peter starts by asking the question: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?”

Peter doesn't directly answer the question... but what he writes next acknowledges that people will be harmed, even if they are eager to do good. "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed." (3:14)

Lucky us! It reflects Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5) when he said "*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*".

And that similarity should not be surprising to us. Peter was there, with Jesus, when Jesus preached that sermon. We, as followers of Christ are blessed, even though we suffer.

And I should take a moment to say it's not because we suffer that we are blessed – because that sort of thinking can lead to some terrible consequences, and the idea that if we make ourselves suffer, we can become closer to God is not consistent with what we learn from the scriptures.

Rather, we are blessed even though we suffer. Despite the suffering that we and Christians throughout the ages have experienced, we are blessed.

Peter tells us that in the face of suffering, in the face of people trying to do us harm because we are eager to do what is good, we shouldn't fear and we shouldn't be intimidated. Rather than being afraid of what others may try to do to us because of our faith, we should focus on Jesus – or as Peter says, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord". (3:15).

And that's a nice Christian catchphrase – "in your hearts revere Christ as Lord". But in practical terms, what does it mean to do that? It is not simply to acknowledge that Jesus is the son of God, but rather to put our trust in him, to put our faith in him. To love him with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. (Matt 22:37)

And not only must we focus on Christ, we must make our defence from anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in us (3:15b). It's easy enough to keep our Christian life more or less secret. It's easy to be a Christian on Sunday mornings, attending church and enjoying fellowship over morning tea afterward. But if we are truly revering Christ as lord in our hearts, it should show through in our lives – in the entirety of our lives – and if our faith shows through in our lives then people will notice.

And if people notice, they will ask or comment, and some of the time – if not much of the time – it will be loaded questions and mockery.

When I was in the process of leaving Meat and Livestock Australia after nearly twenty years, someone I knew well enough to have a chat with over coffee asked me if I had any short-term plans. I said, "Well I'm preaching for the next three weeks", and they asked "Oh, do you go to church?"

I'm sure I that I had, over the years, many conversations about what I did on the weekend, that had failed to include that I'd been to church. I realised I should have done better. I should have been a better witness.

Sure enough: Other people's responses to admissions of faith can range from bemusement to antagonism. If someone asks me about my imaginary friend in the sky, then there's not much I can say with, as Peter calls it, 'gentleness and respect' but other responses can be – or should be – openings for sharing faith. To explain that going to church isn't simply a way to fill in Sunday mornings.

But no matter what they may do, there is nothing that they can do - if we keep our focus on Jesus - that can separate us from God. They may offend and abuse and even physically harm us – but none of those things can overcome what God has done for us in Jesus. Do you think that the killings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Junior would have stopped the hope of people in Christ? Or would have made the sacrifice of Jesus in any way less meaningful? I don't think so.

But in the face of criticism or attack or even persecution, we need to, as Peter says, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”* and not just give an answer, but he tells us *“but do it with gentleness and respect.”*

We need to respect the people we're talking to. We need to share our faith in Jesus with gentleness and respect, and we need to be honest when we do:

“keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (3:16b).

One of the things I keep coming back to is what the biggest criticism of Christians is - not of the Christian faith, but of Christians individually and collectively? I'm sure it's that we're hypocrites.

Famously, Mahatma Gandhi is reputed to have said *“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”*

Whether Gandhi actually said that or not, it does ring true, doesn't it?

Think about the televangelist who preaches generosity, but practices greed. The abuse of children in Christian facilities. The double standards that hold some sins as far worse than others.

And while we should all acknowledge that we are all sinners, and, as the old bumper sticker reminds us – *“Christians aren't perfect just forgiven”*. We need to take such observations to heart.

We can't share the good news of Jesus by tricking people or badgering them or hounding them - or for that matter terrifying them. And neither should we be hiding things or misrepresenting our faith to make it seem more appealing to them. Christ died for our sins! We need to acknowledge that all people are sinful, not least ourselves.

And whatever we say, it must be backed up by how we act.

If our actions don't back up our words, then those who criticise us will certainly have a point. But if our conscience is clear, if we have done the right thing and lived up to our words, then those who choose to abuse us and our faith in Christ will have no genuine complaint – they will, as Peter says, be ashamed of their slander (3:16).

Our good conduct might take away any rational basis for attacks, but it will never stop them. In fact, good conduct may antagonise those who seek to attack us. To harden hearts against God and against his people. We just need to look to the Easter story to see that in action.

“For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” (3:17) says Peter.

So, if we suffer for doing good, for doing the right thing, because of our faith in Christ, then we serve as an example. In the face of suffering, if we are still motivated to do what is good – to do the right thing, then we are being faithful witnesses of Jesus.

And in doing the right thing in the face of suffering, we are following the example of our saviour:

“or Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” (3:18)

And it would be great if today's reading ended there. Because as we read on, from the second part of verse 18, things become very strange indeed.

"He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water," (3:18b-20)

What on earth does that mean?

The reaction to parts of the bible that are difficult to understand, is generally to skip over and ignore them, or the opposite – to dwell on them. To try and force some meaning from them, or force some meaning into them. I've read quite a bit on 1 Peter, and it seems that just about everyone quotes Martin Luther's thoughts on these verses. And what Martin Luther said is this: *"a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means."*

Martin Luther was no lightweight theologian, and while many people have ideas on what this passage might mean, who the spirits in prison might be and so on, there is no clear consensus; not even a weight of opinion. It is a mystery. I think that we simply have lost the context that would have helped Peter's original readers understand what he meant.

I don't think we should ignore it, but equally I don't think we should twist things to try an extract meaning either. Instead we can see it in the context that we have. The death and resurrection of Christ, God's patience, God's salvation – the few through the ark, the many through Jesus.

Just as the book of Genesis tells us that those few were saved through water aboard the ark, so it is the water of baptism that saves us now... but it is not the water itself that saves us – and Peter makes that clear – it is not about the removal of dirt, nor about the ritual, but rather the saving power of Jesus which is acknowledged publicly through baptism.

And that saving power is guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus. In his rising from the dead, the power of sin and death, the very power of evil was broken. Once and for all.

Peter reminds us of the power of the risen Christ, by telling us of Jesus' ascension – Jesus "who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him." (3:22)

And that is our hope. That is our sure and certain hope.

This morning's reading began by asking "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?" (3:13)

The truth is, at one level, that people will harm us.

But at another level, a far deeper level, is that there is nothing that people can do to us that will inflict everlasting harm. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39)

So, remembering that assurance, let's always do the right thing. Let's take away the hypocrisy that people criticise us for. Let's live as Jesus would have us live. Live as Peter implores us to live. Let's live so that those opposed to Christ cannot criticise us on any reasonable ground:

Let's do the right thing. Let's be generous with our time, let others go first, say thank you to the checkout people at the supermarket, let's cheerfully talk to our neighbours, let's be honest in our dealings, pray for our enemies, give to the poor, read and meditate on the scriptures, fill in our tax returns honestly, take a stand against injustice and exploitation, proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth - even just to the end of the street when we can, let's write to our elected representatives when they go astray, contact our families and friends we haven't spoken to in a while, give thanks to God for all we have, be gracious when we are thanked, stop at stop signs, stand behind the yellow line at the train station, ask forgiveness from God and from each other when we have done the wrong thing, and, also, grant forgiveness to people who sin against us. Let's do the right thing.

And we don't do the right thing to earn favour with God, because we have favour with God because of the sacrifice of Jesus once and for all, we do the right thing so that we can be ambassadors of Jesus in this world. To be Christ-like in a fallen world.

Remembering always that we are saved by Jesus' resurrection: Jesus who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Amen