

Stand firm

Today, we come to the last in a series of readings from Peter's first letter. Two weeks ago, we looked at 1 Peter 2, how God has called us to be his people, last week it was 1 Peter 3, and how we, as God's people, are to act in the world. Today, our reading comes from near the end of the letter, and Peter is writing to encourage and strengthen his readers – and indeed to encourage and strengthen us – for whatever lies ahead. Encouraging us to stand firm in the faith we have in Jesus.

“Dear friends,” Peter writes, “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

Peter was writing to people who were going through difficult times. Peter was writing to people in a minority in a predominantly multi-faith society. Peter was writing to people in an increasingly secular world. People would push Christians around. People would put Christians down. People would mock Christians.

Peter was writing specifically to the “exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,” (1:1) – Roman provinces to the north of the Taurus mountains in present-day Turkey. And those people, were people from different backgrounds. Mostly, they would have been Gentiles, but in Peter's time, most of the Christian preaching came from a Jewish base: So some of Peter's readers would have had a Jewish background, and a good understanding of the old testament scriptures, while others would have had a very young faith in God.

If you think about it, the original recipients of this letter from Peter were very much like people in the church today. Not that long ago, in Australian society, it was assumed that everyone would be more-or-less associated with a church in some way. Not today, though. We are very much dispersed through society, traditionally gathering in our various groups, particularly on Sunday mornings, but then going about our daily lives as members of a wider society - a wider society where Christian practices, values, traditions, and in particular beliefs are less and less known and in many respects less and less accepted.

And while we need to appreciate the situation of the church today, and the pushing aside of Christian life in society, it shouldn't really surprise us: the scriptures teach us that the ways of God are not the ways of the world.

This morning's reading starts with Peter saying "Dear friends, do not be surprised". "Dear friends" or even "Beloved" in other translations. He's addressing his readers not simply as people who should be listening to him, or simply as members of churches, but as friends, close friends, dear friends. People who he loves.

When Peter writes to those people - he's not talking down to them about their problems and what they should be doing, but he's talking to them as friends, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as fellow members of the church.

And he's also talking to us.

"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."

That fiery ordeal is a consequence of believers moving to God's side, and not the world's side. It's not personal, in a way. It's not really about you or me, it's about the animosity of the world, to God and the followers of God.

As we heard last week from Chapter 3, "even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed."

So, "Dear friends, do not be surprised".

But. And it's a big 'but' that Peter offers next when he writes "But rejoice", "...rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

As we read through the gospels, we see the anger and the resentment toward Jesus building. They were envious of his following. They tried to discredit him. They tried to incriminate him. They conspired against him. They hurled insults at him. They mocked him. They beat him. And he bore it all. He bore that all the way to the cross, and he allowed himself to be raised up on it.

Lots of people didn't like what Jesus did or what he said or who claimed to be. But he took it all. As Peter said in Chapter 2, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats." (2:23a)

And now that Jesus was no longer present on earth in human form, where was that anger and resentment and abuse directed? It was directed at Jesus'

followers. The people Peter was writing too, and at Peter himself, and at all the other Christians across the world.

Just like it is today. If people today don't like Jesus, well, they can't do much to him - but they can certainly take it out on his followers. And at times in history and even in some places across the world today, that happens in a violent and brutal way.

But to share in Jesus' sufferings means also benefiting from their consequences. So when his glory is revealed, our sufferings will fade away to nothing, and we will be overjoyed.

And Peter reinforces that point in verse 14 when he writes "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

If you are reviled or insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed. And I think that the reviling or insult here is more than just harsh words, certainly fore Peter's original listeners. Sticks and stones and all that. But the insults would have been harsher: exclusion from social groups (or even families), loss of status or privileges, loss of business opportunities and so on and on.

But if that happens, you know you're on the right track. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, insulted because you are a follower of Jesus, then you are living out your Christian life and your Christian witness to the world.

So, to be a follower of Christ is not always going to be an easy thing. It's going to be hard and we're going to be insulted and all the rest of it. But we can always look beyond that.

We have received God's grace, because we have put our faith and trust in Jesus. Jesus who came into the world, who was abused and mocked and beaten and killed. Who took the burden of all that is wrong with the world onto himself when he was crucified.

Jesus who conquered death, and gives to all who turn to him the sure and certain hope of resurrection life with him.

And we can look to that future with hope and joy.

But sometimes, we know, the path to that future will be tough.

From that vision of hope in verse fourteen, our lectionary reading moves forward to verse 6 of Chapter 5, the last passage before the greetings and

benediction at the end of Peter's letter. And in this section, Peter tells us how we are to cope as Christians in the world, through those hard and tough times.

The first thing he says is "Humble yourselves". So he's told us about the joy we can expect, the fact we are blessed, that the very Spirit of God is resting on us – you might remember that earlier in the letter he declared us to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (2:9) but even though we are those things, and we can be confident of those things, we mustn't lord it over others. So the first thing we do is humble ourselves.

In the verse 5 Peter wrote that we must clothe ourselves in humility in our dealings with each other (5:5), but here in verse 6 he goes much further. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand" (5:6) he writes. It is not simply being humble to each other, but getting down on our figurative knees and bowing before God. It is recognising our inability to help ourselves and the futility of trying to do so. It is about humbling ourselves just as Jesus humbled himself.

And just as God raised Jesus up, so he will raise us up. Not by our efforts, but by his grace. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

And yes, in the meantime, it will sometimes be tough. Turning the other cheek or walking the extra mile is never going to be easy. But we are not left alone. "Cast all your anxiety on him," Peter writes, "because he cares for you." (5:7)

And God has proved that he cares for us, by sending Jesus to save us. He cares for us so much that he gave up his son for us.

And while there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, we need to respond to God's grace – and so, Peter writes "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

I often reflect that the devil - the tempter, the deceiver, Satan, doesn't get mentioned much in churches these days. The devil, once to be feared, has become increasingly ignored, and when the devil is mentioned, he is more and more caricatured: The thin moustache, the pointy beard, the red outfit and the pitchfork - a cartoon villain.

But the scriptures give us a different view. For example in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul regards the Devil as a real threat, he writes: "*For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the*

heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.”
(6:12)

It seems to me that, sometimes, there is evil at work in the world. Evil that perhaps transcends what humans might come up with on their own. Ideas that take root and spread and corrupt. Certainly not someone prancing around in red tights waving a pitchfork, but something – someone – far more insidious, far more tempting, far more corrupting and far more dangerous.

Peter certainly takes the devil seriously: “the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Thanks to Sir David Attenborough and many other filmmakers, we all know how prowling lions operate: They prowl around the herd of zebra or gazelles or wildebeest, looking for an opportunity to attack the weak, or the young, or the old, or the one who wanders away from the rest of the herd...

I’ve heard it claimed that lions don’t roar until after they’ve eaten, so a roaring lion is not a threat... I’m not sure that Peter would have been an expert in lion behaviour. And I’m sure I’d be afraid of a lion – whether it was silent or roaring.

So I think the message is ‘Don’t let ourselves be taken. Don’t let others be taken in.’

“Resist him, standing firm in the faith,” writes Peter. Protect each other. Stand firm and hold fast to the things of God and resist the world. Don’t be the one who wanders away - and do your best to stop others wandering away too. Again, it’s a tough thing, but it’s what we are called to do, and we regularly pray about it: “Save us from the time of trial” or in the older language “Lead us not into temptation”.

When we think of temptations, we tend to think of the big things... but I think temptations start off quite small. Why do I need to read the bible? I know most of the good bits. Why not claim a bit extra on my tax return? Why not drive a little bit over the speed limit? Why not spend my money the way I want to?

And why not this, and why not that, and just a bit less or just a bit more.

And that’s what I think temptation is like. That’s the way of the world. I think that few if any people wake up one morning and decide to be corrupt, or engage in domestic violence, or have an affair or steal the company’s funds... or whatever it is.

That's not how temptation works. That's not how the devil works. Instead, it's the foot in the door, the thin end of the wedge, the slippery slope... or some other cliché.

Wherever we are, we're not alone in this, as well as standing firm in our faith in Jesus, Peter tells us that we "know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings." So we can look to them for support. Practical support. Prayerful support.

And whatever each of us goes through, whatever all of us go through together, we know that it doesn't last forever. Peter writes: *"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."* (5:10)

Suffering can seem endless. Situations can seem hopeless. But they will come to an end. So stand firm, Peter says. Things will not go on forever. Sufferings may not be brief, but they will only be temporary. And they fade away compared to what is to come. As Paul writes to the Romans *"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."* (Rom 8:18)

That is the assurance that the apostles knew nearly two thousand years ago. And that's the same assurance that we have today. Stand firm in Christ. Christ who lived and died and rose again for us. Christ who has opened the way to everlasting life for us. Stand firm. Hold fast. Take heart.

And so, finally, Peter brings his message a close, with praise to God:

To him be the power forever and ever.

Amen.