

Sharing in Suffering

1 Peter 4 v 12-14, 5 v 6-11

John 17 v 1-11

Ps 68 v 1-10

Written by Sarah Ashton

May our feet walk in your way Lord, may our hands do your work Lord, may our minds think of you Lord, may our hearts be filled with your love Lord and may my mouth speak your words this morning Lord. Amen

This is the final sermon in the series on 1 Peter. The title "Sharing in Suffering" is a little daunting as none of us want to suffer. I was away at Easter this year and went to the Cathedral Church in the city we were near and the Bishop preached an excellent sermon that focused on how the emergence of new life involves struggle. He talked about an egg being a symbol for new life, but, for the chick to break out of the egg, it has to first break the shell and then fight its way out, but even as it emerges from the egg there is more struggle because it has to adjust to a new environment and fend for itself; everything has changed. This is true for all new life, be it the chick in the egg, the seed in the soil or the baby in the womb. The emergence of new life involves struggle. That struggle we can think of as suffering and the new life that faith in Christ brings us is not exempt from the birth process as we move into faith and then the ongoing issues of living in a secular society, we face a struggle or suffering to sustain our new life in Christ.

Our Epistle starts by addressing the reader as friends who should not be surprised by the suffering they are enduring as it is not something strange. In fact Peter mentions suffering 12 times in this epistle, suggesting that the congregation were experiencing difficult circumstances and he reminds them that they are not alone in this. Christ, Himself, suffered both mentally and physically. He was working to change the way people responded to God and to bring marginalised people into a relationship with God. He was betrayed and denied by His friends and then He was beaten and crucified, and from the cross He could see His mother weeping. Christ experienced deep human suffering on all levels.

Peter advises the Christians to behave with integrity and patience as he suggests that it is not unusual for the people of God to be persecuted. Peter then says that if people are suffering as Christ did, they will be glorified with him in the future. But it is not just the hope of future glory with Christ that Christians have. In real time, the here and now, they have the Spirit of God

present in their lives for support and comfort. We can be assured that if we live in the Spirit we will receive comfort and support when times are tough. V14 says that if you are reproached because of the name of Christ, you are being reproached because you are a Christian: so you are being reproached for being like Christ. Peter says that is the highest honour which any human can be given. It is more than having a set of beliefs; it is about showing the right behaviours too. As the divine spirit rested on Jesus, so it rests on His persecuted followers. It is a bit of a paradox, as what is making followers unhappy in their life in this world (persecution), is their main happiness in God's eyes. If you have Jesus in your heart you cannot be truly unhappy. You might be suffering, but you are not without hope.

As we now move into chapter 5 of the Epistle, Peter gives three instructions on how followers should behave; with humility, discipline and resistance. In Luke's Gospel we are told (ch14 v11) 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted'. It is not the praise of people that is important, although it does reassure and encourage us, but ultimately it is God who knows our motives and it is God who will lift us up. This is hard, as we want to be seen to be doing God's work, but to be really humble about it, we should be doing God's work quietly without anyone being aware of all that we do. When we have worries, we should hand them to God. This doesn't mean we won't have to work through them, but we can share them with God. A trouble shared is a trouble halved. He will be there to support us. Humility requires us to be self-aware. It is not about low self-regard or self-degradation. It is our humility that enables us to come before God and give Him our anxieties, and when we do give Him our anxieties, He will be there for us.

The discipline that is referred to here is not punishment but self-control and being alert or aware. If we don't exercise self-control in our personal lives they are chaotic, we need to sleep and eat regularly, maintain personal hygiene and dress ourselves, have some sort of routine. Our Christian life is the same. We need to read the Bible and pray regularly, confess our sins to God, come together to share in the breaking of bread and teaching for spiritual sustenance. Christianity is not an ad hoc add-on that can be picked up and used for our convenience. It is a way of life that is far deeper than just attending church on a Sunday; it should permeate all of every day for each of us. It is a faith that continues to grow and be deepened by our participation and self-discipline. By being so strong and steadfast in our faith we can overpower any enemy who is trying to prevent the establishment of God's Kingdom here on earth. This is the resistance that we need.

Our resistance is bolstered by God's grace; that is the unconditional love that God has for us. Even though we are not perfect (and never will be, as we are human), God is prepared to forgive us and bless us. What is there not to like about following God?

Our Gospel reading starts with Jesus praying for Himself. He knows that the time has come for Him to pay the ultimate sacrifice. He stresses that all He has done on earth, He has done in God's name and with His authority with the aim of bringing believers to eternal life. Jesus talks about existing with God before the world existed and how He looks forward to being back with God personally after His upcoming death and resurrection. He knows He must be totally humiliated at the hands of men before He can be back in God's glory.

He then prays for His disciples; the group of people whom God gave Him to teach and educate about a better way of life. At last, the disciples have come to understand that the message of Jesus and the example that He has set through His life are all God given teachings. The Gospel says that the disciples accepted the teaching of Jesus (unlike the Jewish leaders who heard it but did not receive it); they knew that Jesus was from God and understanding this led them further into truth; but over and above these points they believed. Jesus emphasises that all He has comes from God. If all Jesus has comes from God, how grateful should we be for what we have? His prayer for the disciples asks that they should have the same close relationship with God that He has. In having this relationship with God they will have protection from suffering in the power of God's name. This suffering is what Peter was referring to at the start of the Epistle, but as true believers we have God's protection in the grace and love He shows us when we turn to Him; as Christians this is not something we have to face on our own.

I started this sermon by talking about the sermon I heard on Easter Day and the thought that the emergence of new life, in whatever form, involves struggle and adjustment. Our new life as Christians is included in this, we have to leave the worldly behind and develop a deep and trusting relationship with God through faith. We also need to remember that Peter's epistle starts with the words 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into 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'. (Peter 1 v3-5)

As this is a reflective service let us all spend a few moments thinking about what we can do to develop our own relationship with God so that we are stronger in the face of adversity in Christ's name.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us to focus on our relationship with you, that we may be like the disciples and believe faithfully in you. Guide us to understand and accept the teachings of Jesus, so that when we face difficulties, challenges, struggles or suffering we know that we are not on our own. Grant us your grace to face the challenges of life in this world and do your work faithfully. Amen