

Easter 3, 2023

"Let your conduct among the Gentiles be honorable" (1 St. Peter 2.12)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In last Sunday's Gospel, we heard the Lord Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." The key point that we focused on was His Sacrifice for the benefit of others: "the good shepherd – the model shepherd – the beautiful shepherd -- gives his life *for the sheep*, and not for any advantage of his own. And, in reflecting on that the Collect and Epistle urged us to follow in His steps – to imitate the example of the beautiful Shepherd.

But how should we do that? How should we follow in the steps of the Lord Jesus? Today's Epistle gives three pieces of concrete instruction. But first, some background: like last week's Epistle, it was written by St. Peter as a general letter to be circulated to the Churches in what is present-day Turkey. At that time, the Church was undergoing severe persecution under the Roman Emperor, Nero. He was an erratic, inhuman, sadistic man; and yet, he was a great builder. Wanting to build up Rome to be more grandeur and glorious as the capital city of his empire, Nero set fire to it.

It is said that, as the city burned, he gleefully fiddled at the sight: imagine the size of the flames, and the cries for help, and the screams of terror; and yet Nero fiddled with glee. When the people suspected him of being the arsonist, Nero accused the Church, then only about 35 years old. Quickly, in and around Rome, Christians were arrested and tortured and executed in the most cruel ways: they were tied in animal skins and thrown into the arena with hungry dogs; they were thrown to wild beasts; they were tied to stakes in Nero's palatial gardens and lit up like torches.

It is with all of that as the background, that St. Peter wrote his first Epistle to the churches in Turkey, addressing the Christians as "Dearly beloved". "Dearly beloved, he said, "I beseech you – I beg you – as strangers and pilgrims". That's exactly what they were – strangers and pilgrims. However, instead of advising them to stay hidden, or keep their head down, or move away from the hot spots, Peter encouraged them to follow in the steps of their good and beautiful Shepherd. How? By doing three things.

First he said, “abstain from fleshly or carnal lusts which war against the soul”. In these words, we can hear the promises of Baptism, when a person says that they will renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp (splendour) and glory of the world, and all sinful desires of the flesh.” Not all desires of the flesh are bad. We have desires to eat, to drink, to rest, to sleep, to exercise, to perform our personal hygiene. Those are healthy desires of the flesh. St. Peter was speaking about the things which “war against the soul”. We heard about some of these in the Epistle on Easter Day: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness... anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk” (Colossians 3. 5-8). As we all know, these war against our souls. They are soul-destroying because they compete against the operation of the Holy Spirit who seeks to nurture the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, kindness and self-control. (Galatians 5.22)

The second instruction from St. Peter on following in the steps of the Lord Jesus was builds on his first point. He urged the Christians to let their conduct among the Gentiles be honourable. Basically, to let the light of Christ shine by doing good works: acts of kindness and charity. Behaviour that models unselfishness, patience and self-control. Speech that is free from cursing, lying and gossip. We know this – our words and actions must match up with holy intentions – so that we are faithful to the Lord and obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

St. Peter’s third instruction focuses on our responsibilities with the government; as he puts it, “whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors as sent by him”. Inasmuch as we have watched – with great frustration and confusion -- our Canadian culture leave its Christian moorings over the past 30 years and betray principles and values that were foundational to the establishment of our society, we have not reached the level of animosity and persecution experienced by the early Church.

For example, a letter, written in 110 AD to the Roman Emperor, by the governor of Bithynia, gives us some insight into the gravity of St. Peter’s word. Bithynia was one of the provinces mentioned at the beginning of St. Peter’s Epistle where Christians were living. This short letter reads as follows:

“With those who have been brought before me as Christians, I have pursued the following course: I have asked them if they were Christians, and if they confessed, I

have asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment. If they have persisted, I have commanded them to be led away to punishment."

How easy it would have been for those Christians to deny their Faith – especially being threatened with punishment. Truly they were 'strangers and pilgrims' at that time. And yet, St. Peter instructed them to obey the laws of the land. "Submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." Do not, deny Him and do not do anything that is contrary to His Word; but, fulfil your responsibilities as Roman citizens to the best of your ability, for the lord's sake.

So, these were his instructions: abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul; maintain honourable conduct amongst your non-Christian neighbours; and obey the laws of the land as good citizens. These are the 'how tos' in terms of following in Jesus steps. But there is one more thing: remember that the good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He does what He does, for the benefit of the sheep – not Himself. And so it is for us in our daily living. As children of the Holy Trinity, we are to follow in the steps of our Lord so that, our neighbours – in St. Peter's words – "may see our good works and give glory to God".

Living the new life in today's culture; trying to be salt and light for Christ is difficult and even intimidating. It is no picnic, for sure. And this is where this morning's Gospel offers a word of assurance. Jesus was talking to His disciples about His suffering, Crucifixion and Resurrection: "(In) a little while ye shall not see Me; and again a little while and ye shall see Me". And, knowing that His departure would be scary for them, and so He said, "You shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy....Now you have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man will take from you".

The Greek word for 'sorrow' – used four times in today's Gospel – means 'grief'. Being Christians, and trying to raise our children and grand-children as Christians in this day and age, will involve sorrow and grief. John Bradford, a Deacon in the 16th century Church of England and Royal Chaplain wrote of this while imprisoned for his Christian beliefs in London. He said, "The entrance to thy kingdom and paradise, O Lord, is not from a paradise, but from a wilderness; for we come not from pleasure to pleasure, but from pain to pleasure..."

And so it is true, we can expect a wilderness and much pain in living the new life. We will grieve at the ungodly attitudes and policies as well as the inconsistencies

in our culture. We will grieve because of the disrespect and blasphemy towards God the Holy Trinity – unholy attitudes, policies and behaviours in which the world takes delight. But the Lord assures us that this grief will be changed. Your sorrow will be turned into joy. Why? Because Christ is risen! The powers of darkness have been defeated and the final victory will be declared when Jesus returns.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost...