

Scripture for Sunday May 3rd 2020

Isaiah 53: 3-6 (NIV)

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. ⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

1 Peter 2:11-25 (New Testament for Everyone)

¹¹ My beloved ones, I beg you – strangers and resident aliens as you are – to hold back from the fleshly desires that wage war against your true lives. ¹² Keep up good conduct among non-Christians, so that when they speak against you as evildoers they will observe your good deeds and praise God on the day of his royal arrival.

¹³ Be subject to every human institution, for the sake of the Lord: whether to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish evildoers and praise those who do good. ¹⁵ This, you see, is God's will. He wants you to behave well and so to silence foolish and ignorant people. ¹⁶ Live as free people (though don't use your freedom as a veil to hide evil!), but as slaves of God. ¹⁷ Do honour to all people; love the family; reverence God; honour the emperor.

¹⁸ Let slaves obey their masters with all respect, not only the good and kind ones but also the unkind ones. ¹⁹ It is to your credit, you see, if because of a godly conscience you put up with unjust and painful suffering. ²⁰ After all, what credit is it if you do something wrong, are beaten for it, and take it patiently? But if you do what is right, suffer for it, and bear it patiently, this is to your credit before God.

²¹ This, after all, is what came with the terms of your call, because the Messiah, too, suffered on your behalf, leaving behind a pattern for you so that you should follow the way he walked. ²² He committed no sin, nor was there any deceit in his mouth. ²³ When he was insulted, he didn't insult in return, when he suffered, he didn't threaten, but he gave himself up to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might be free from sins and live for righteousness. It is by his wound that you are healed. ²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your true lives.

Sermon: As Slaves of God, Live as Free People

I mentioned last week that 1 Peter is a letter of *encouragement* to the churches in the region we call Turkey today.¹ The recipients were primarily *non-Jewish Christians*, who he describes as “exiles,” or resident aliens,² as they were generally treated with suspicion *within* their *own* communities. That’s because with their conversion to Christianity, many were experiencing some form of social bullying,³ probably because they refused to worship the local deities or honour Caesar.⁴ This was likely compounded by their inferior status as the writer specifically addresses *slaves* in today’s reading.⁵ Regardless of their social standing, the author reminds them of their new identity as *beloved* by God the Father through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁶ This good news is genuine hope that gives *life*, even if life is hard. OK, so we have a new identity as a Christian, but how does that mean we live in the wider world? The writer says we are to be to be *holy*; that’s our new *vocation*.⁷ But what does that *look* like?⁸ He has some shocking things to say about that, as we will now see!

He begins: “My beloved ones, I beg you to hold back from the fleshly desires that wage war against your true lives.”⁹ When we hear such a stern exhortation to moral living it seems typically religious, perhaps even prudish! But this kind of rhetoric was part of the conventional moral wisdom of the day. It was commonly argued that those who were *truly* free *were* those who were self-controlled and *not* driven by craving material things. And the stoic moralists taught that a slave who possesses this independence from passion is superior to the master who is ruled by desire.¹⁰ So on one level, there is nothing radically *new* in this teaching.¹¹ We also need to be reminded that at the end of the previous chapter, the author tells us that “fleshly” things are like the grass that withers - and this is *contrasted* with the word of the Lord which stands forever.¹² The key, then, is to hold on to our identity as *beloved* by God, and to remember we are part of a bigger faith *story*, one that will endure, and one being written

¹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/New-Life-New-Lifestyle.pdf>.

² *Resident Aliens* is the title of an important book by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon.

³ The kind of suffering could include being disinherited or thrown out of your home, having your business boycotted, or more generally being ostracized simply for their faith. (They were not necessarily ‘foreigners,’ though some slaves were.)

⁴ Just like the Jews for that matter.

⁵ 1 Pet 2:18–25, and women – 1 Pet 3:1–6 - owned by, or married to, non-Christian men.

⁶ 1 Pet 1:2-3 (NTFE); see also Titus 3:5-7.

⁷ 1 Pet 1:14-15. See also Matt 5:48 (Sermon on the Mount); Lev 11:44 – 45; 19:2; 20:7.

⁸ The writer of 1 Peter develops that in the next section - 1 Pet 2:11-3:12 (even to 4:11).

⁹ 1 Pet 2:11,1. (See also 1 Pet 5:6–11; 1:13-14). Paul uses a similar tension between flesh and the spirit in Rom 7:14–20; Gal 5:16–21. Paul’s “flesh” is the realm of selfishness both within the individual and the life of the church. For 1 Peter, it was the self-centered behaviour of *non-Christians* that was the key issue. We need to be careful not to simply *assume* Paul’s teaching on “flesh” here, but to hear “Peter’s” own view.

¹⁰ “Consequently, Christians who could show that their religion had enabled them to achieve this lofty status could use their conduct to make a claim for its *truth!*” (See Pheme Perkins, *Interpretation (1 Peter)*, John Knox Press, 1995, p46-47.)

¹¹ Moreover, the Jews had learned to live out their faith and their communal life while being surrounded by – even ruled by - other cultures that did *not* respect their God. So this exhortation would resonate with both Jews and the Greco-Roman world.

¹² 1 Pet 1:24-25, citing Isa 40:6-8. (That being the case, the “Lord” is God, not Jesus.)

by God and in which we have an important role. That being the case, part of being holy means behaving *honourably* so that when non-Christians slander you, accusing you of actually doing “evil,” others will recognize your deeds as genuinely good and so praise *God*.¹³ Jesus says the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁴ And this doesn’t mean having a sanctimonious reputation for being “holier-than-thou,” because it is *God* who will be praised for our deeds, *not you or me!* Put a different way, our good conduct will be a sign to the discerning that our message is, in fact true!¹⁵ So living honourably and refraining from evil desires are, therefore, two sides of the same coin.¹⁶

The writer then goes on to talk about the relationship between Christians and those in power, saying “Be subject to every human institution, for the sake of the Lord: whether to the emperor as supreme, or to governors who are sent by him to punish evildoers and praise those who do good.”¹⁷ It’s not easy being a follower of Jesus, then or now. In their case, these “resident aliens” had virtually no influence to change the powers that be. If they rebelled, as some slaves did, the mighty power of Rome would soon put a violent stop to that in order to maintain the status quo. As an example, just consider the famous case of Spartacus, whose slave rebellion was defeated in 71 BC with 1000’s of captives being crucified on the Appian Way approaching Rome. No, the author was *not* encouraging these Christians to become martyrs for a point of principle; quite the opposite in fact. He wants their behaviour *not* to cause offence amongst the local citizens. He is advocating that Christians pragmatically support law and order to silence their detractors and so reduce their vulnerability to oppression.¹⁸ The underlying principle is that God desires order not chaos. And since the Roman emperor and his appointed governors also wanted to promote good order, although for selfish reasons, it was to the advantage of Christians to respect them! This can be reduced to a memorable slogan: “Give honour to *all* people; love the family of believers; reverence God; honour the emperor.”¹⁹ It went without saying that Christians can’t worship the emperor as divine, but it’s prudent to at least *respect* the state, even when it does things you don’t approve. It is a mistake to think this is simply passive acceptance. If, as Christians today, we can vote, or stand for election, or make a positive difference in some ethically honourable way, its because we have democratic freedoms that simply were *unheard* of in their day. As I said earlier, those social “exiles” had no rights to speak of, which was *literally* true if they were slaves. Even so, the writer has earlier proclaimed their new status as children of God, so he now encourages them

¹³ 1 Pet 2:12 – which actually ends “the day of his royal arrival,” i.e., an *eschatological* reward. The writer is encouraging Christians to trust God who sees all and who will judge fairly on the Last Day. [See also 1 Pet 1:4-5,9,13b. For this writer, it is fair to say salvation is *eschatological* in nature, to be realised on the Last Day and, for now, we live in hope. The basis of this *incorruptible* inheritance is the novel kind of body of the resurrected Jesus. See also Eph 1:11–14.]

¹⁴ Matt 5:16.

¹⁵ See also [10]. It is also a sign of the *new* creation appearing with the present *old* creation.

¹⁶ And “to live honourably” is to live according to standards that are *higher* than even those of the “world” would expect.

¹⁷ 1 Pet 2:13-14. See also Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Tim 2:1–3. In those days, of course, it was the Romans or their surrogates who were in power. And today, that depends on which country you live in. Whether this is Russia, China, India, or a Western nation, the relationships between Christians and the state is complex. We need to be very careful as to how we understand these (limited) texts (and their contexts) and consider them today in *our* contexts. Note “every human institution” means more than political leaders, it includes family households (including slaves) and local trade associations.

¹⁸ See 1 Pet 2:15.

¹⁹ 1 Pet 2:17.

to “*live as free people*” knowing full well that they weren’t literally free, but to live with integrity because they are now to consider themselves “slaves of God” purchased by the death of Jesus.²⁰ The point being, repressive tyranny and violent revolution do not make for a stable society; a non-violent third way is needed. And in the process, God will work in surprising ways through your good example to change a bad situation and make it considerably better. As we will hear later, that is precisely the route modelled by Jesus.²¹

It is interesting to reflect on this passage in the light of our government leaders’ mandates at this time of COVID. We *like* our freedoms; we *don’t* like being told what to do! And we are *not* very patient. Some church leaders, claiming allegiance to a higher authority, have defied national guidelines and have faced the consequences. I suggest those pastors re-read this text because – in our *present* context - their defiance doesn’t bring glory to God, as they anticipate, rather it gives the wider church a bad reputation and vulnerable to (unnecessary) criticism. Of course, we are all concerned as to whether the Government has got it right. And we are all worried about the effects of this crisis on the economy and society as a whole. Many already had a cynical view of politicians, others a serious mistrust of science.²² However, if greedy capitalist nations throughout the world have all shut down their economies because of this contagious virus – it *must* be serious!²³ If we still have doubts, I suggest we listen to the voice of medical professionals, including the front-line doctors and nurses who know first-hand what this virus can do.²⁴ And, of course this *doesn’t* mean God is a political supporter of Trudeau or Ford, rather God *desires order not chaos* – and, therefore, so should Christians, says the author of 1 Peter.²⁵

Speaking about those in authority, he goes on to say: “Let slaves obey their masters with all respect, not only the good and kind ones but also the harsh ones.”²⁶ Church history has made a mess of such texts and have misinterpreted them as God’s endorsement of slavery! As I mentioned earlier, the writer is *not* advocating for a violent revolt by slaves; he knew that was pointless. But as the cynic puts it: “Remember the golden rule: the one with the gold makes the rules!” It’s those with power who need a change of heart. And we know historically that such reform eventually came from the slave *owners*, not

²⁰ 1 Pet 2:16, (“And don’t use your freedom as a veil to hide evil!”); see also 1 Pet 1:2-3, 18-21.

²¹ 1 Pet 2:21-25.

²² Consider the “debates” over climate change, for example.

²³ It also illustrates that many don’t appreciate the significance of the word, “*exponential*” as we typically expect controlling feedback mechanisms.

²⁴ This last week, the tally of *health-workers* who have died from COVID reached 100 in the UK; many others are sick. And over 25,000 deaths have been reported nationally.

²⁵ Respecting and obeying governments is extremely tricky and *each* situation has to be weighed with care. Ethics *and* context matters; reflect on the American Civil Rights movement, for example, *and* consider divinely inspired prophetic voices that speak truth to power.

²⁶ 1 Pet 2:18. See also Col 3:22-4:1; Eph 6:5-9. These texts have instructions for slave owners – absent here in 1 Pet 2:18. In the ancient world everything was done by slaves. It was a form of systematic legalized dehumanization. The slave is the property of his or her owner who provided enough board and lodging to enable the slave to work each. But as “property” the slave was often ill-treated physically, sexually, and exploited in many different ways.

the slaves; that's how abolition was realized.²⁷ Even so, there are many people today who work long hours at minimum wage, or work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. They are stuck and many feel like they are "slaves" in all but name.²⁸ Without sounding patronizing, it is worth remembering that the early church grew in part because its message gave dignity and self-worth to the lowly and, as a means of self-preservation, this writer tells these slaves to show respect and obey their masters even when they are unjust. Even in our own places of employment, it is prudent to respect our bosses even when we want to erupt and give them a piece of our mind! Yet remember this instruction was *not* written to placate the marginalized in society by someone who lived in a million-dollar home! He understood the brutality that slaves experienced.²⁹ And these words would have had *added* power for those who read them *after* Peter's own death, which was probably by crucifixion – the kind of death for someone with no rights.

Let's be clear then, this writer is *not* colluding with wickedness or simply recommending people remain passive while suffering violence. On the other hand, the author is also *not* encouraging the overzealous to seek suffering for its own sake!³⁰ And he is *not* supporting the notion that the *more* we suffer, the *more* we will be commended by God at the end of time!³¹ Instead, he connects such abuse with the example of Jesus, whose *non-retaliation* in the face of *his own* suffering is the model for all believers. This is a very hard pill to swallow, yet the writer quotes what may have been an early hymn, saying: "For to this you were called, since Christ *also* suffered for you, leaving an example for *you* to follow in his steps. He committed *no* sin *nor* was deceit found in *his* mouth. When he was maligned, he did *not* answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we may cease from sinning and live for righteousness. By his wounds you were healed. For you were going astray like sheep but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."³² You may recognize within those words quotes from the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53, our Old Testament reading. What the writer means is that the ongoing story of Christians experiencing adversity *for following Jesus* is nothing less than our participation in the story of Jesus, which itself deeply rooted in Scripture. Challenging stuff to hear!³³

²⁷ We are, on the one hand, called to respond to and oppose unjust actions and words when we are able. But that implies that we are in a position of power and influence. Even so, Christians must support those who are suffering.

²⁸ And being in violent households or abusive workplaces are awful places to be trapped within.

²⁹ Remember too that the suffering here is *not* because of their poor performance at work, but unjust suffering as a direct result of them being Christians. Showing good behaviour was a way to counteract those non-Christian masters that thought that Christianity was inciting newly-converted slaves into insubordination.

³⁰ Church history has shown how this and similar texts can be abused (e.g., asceticism or seeking martyrdom)!

³¹ Those Franciscans and other Christian orders that have embraced poverty see walking in Christ's footsteps as a positive thing and at the heart of the gospel. Nevertheless, this is 'voluntary' poverty, one might say.

³² 1 Pet 2:21-25. Moreover, "Peter" does *not* deny the shame that Jesus had as being executed, but embraces it.

³³ The whole theme is essentially repeated in 1 Pet 3:8-4:19!

I said at the beginning that this letter is one of *encouragement*, but it's also one of *exhortation*; both are important. As I have reflected on *this* passage I am so reminded of the Sermon on the Mount.³⁴ When I preached on that back in February, that too was a tough sermon to preach *and* to hear!³⁵ Preachers, like politicians, have unpopular messages at times. Listen again to the words of Jesus again: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."³⁶ Or, "I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."³⁷ Finally, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."³⁸ Are not these words and themes echoed by the writer of 1 Peter? As I said earlier, this is very hard for us to accept. But the Christian message is not intended to be a popular one! Jesus did *not* get crucified for merely telling people to be nice to one another and to pray for peace with justice. If that is what we have reduced his teachings to then we have misunderstood his message. Being *holy*³⁹ is our new vocation as Jesus followers, are we going to embrace that calling?

In conclusion, let's re-hear a key underlying point of this 1 Peter passage again: "*As slaves of God, live as free people.*"⁴⁰ If you usually live a life of carefree freedom, where you are "the captain of your soul," then this present curtailment of your freedoms must seem like hell. This passage says that you have misunderstood the nature of freedom, your true identity, and I therefore *exhort* you to think about what it means to be a *slave or servant of God*. On the other hand, there are those who are followers of Jesus, who are slaves of God, but yet who live in bondage. You are *not* free. And I *encourage* you to think further about what it means to *live as free people*. Not using that freedom as a pretext for evil, of course, but to explore the meaning of forgiveness and so grounding your identity as truly beloved by God the Father.⁴¹ Amen.

³⁴ This is alluded to earlier, see [7], [14]. Matthew may have been written *after* 1 Peter, in which case the oral tradition in Jesus' preaching (see Matt 5-7) seems to have been faithfully represented/echoed in 1 Peter.

³⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Life-In-God%E2%80%99s-New-Community.pdf> .

³⁶ Matt 5:11-12.

³⁷ Matt 5:39.

³⁸ Matt 5:44-45a. Note Jesus' sermon was to the crowds, not merely a memo to himself! He expected his followers to *practice* his teaching – as did the writer of 1 Peter.

³⁹ Recall 1 Pet 1:14-15. See also Matt 5:48 (Sermon on the Mount); Lev 11:44 – 45; 19:2; 20:7.

⁴⁰ 1 Pet 2:17.

⁴¹ This also includes a *Spirit-filled* identity, an aspect undeveloped here, and whose presence is with us on our journey.