

## Scripture Readings for Sunday 24 May 2020

### **1 Peter 4:12-14; 1 5:6-11 (New Testament For Everyone)**

<sup>12</sup> Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal which is coming upon you to test you, as though this were some strange thing that was happening to you. <sup>13</sup> Rather, celebrate! You are sharing the sufferings of the Messiah. Then, when his glory is revealed, you will celebrate with real, exuberant joy. <sup>14</sup> If you are abused because of the name of the Messiah, you are blessed by God, because the spirit of glory and of God is resting upon you.

<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, then, under God's powerful hand, so that he may lift you up at the right time. <sup>7</sup> Throw all your care upon him, because he cares about you. <sup>8</sup> Stay in control of yourselves; stay awake. Your enemy, the devil, is stalking around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, staying resolute in your faith, and knowing that other family members in the rest of the world are facing identical sufferings. <sup>10</sup> Then, after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you in the Messiah Jesus to the glory of his new age, will himself put you in good order, and will establish and strengthen you and set you on firm foundations. <sup>11</sup> To him be the power for ever. Amen.

### **John 17:1-11 (New Testament For Everyone)**

<sup>17</sup> After Jesus had said this, he lifted up his eyes to heaven. 'Father,' he said, 'the moment has come. Glorify your son, so that your son may glorify you. <sup>2</sup> Do this in the same way as you did when you gave him authority over all flesh, so that he could give the life of God's coming age to everyone you gave him. <sup>3</sup> And by "the life of God's coming age" I mean this: that they should know you, the only true God, and Jesus the Messiah, the one you sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, by completing the work you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> So now, father, glorify me, alongside yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world existed. <sup>6</sup> I revealed your name to the people you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you; you gave them to me; and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything which you gave me comes from you. <sup>8</sup> I have given them the words you gave me, and they have received them. They have come to know, in truth, that I came from you. They have believed that you sent me.' <sup>9</sup> I'm praying for them. I'm not praying for the world, but for the people you've given me. They belong to you. <sup>10</sup> All mine are yours; all yours are mine; and I'm glorified in them. <sup>11</sup> I'm not in the world any longer, but they're still in the world; I'm coming to you. Holy father, keep them in your name, the name you've given to me, so that they may be one, just as we are one.

## Sermon: Our Sufferings Do Not Escape God's Notice

Today we come to the last in this Lectionary series on 1 Peter for the Season of Easter; next week is Pentecost. Our reading is the author's *final* words of encouragement and exhortation. Before we look at what he says, let me remind you of the original audience's context.<sup>1</sup> The letter was written primarily to non-Jewish Christians<sup>2</sup> in the region we call Turkey today. As a result of their conversion to Christianity, they *became*, in effect, social outcasts<sup>3</sup> and their alienation was a mark of their faithfulness to Jesus. And, as we heard last week, the tone of the letter has a sense of "us" and "them" about it, of or "Christians" *against* - or *separate from* - the "world," a perspective which may seem strange to many in the West today.<sup>4</sup> The reason being that many Christians *don't* feel that our society shuns us or seeks to oppress us, either socially or economically. Rather than the tension and opposition that the writer addresses, there is often *apathy* or *indifference* to Christianity in our Western culture. Moreover, there are many noble and altruistic people who do *good* in the community and who make no claim of being religious.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, aspects of 1 Peter *may* seem irrelevant to us. However, there *are* many places in the world where Christianity is a minority religion and those in power have little regard for human rights and seek to oppress social minorities, sometimes aggressively. In such situations, Christians lack influence to change the power systems and social pressures that exist, and many can't escape to other more tolerant countries. The message of 1 Peter will resonate with *their* circumstances because it parallels that of the original readers. We must pray for such people and appreciate the efforts of all those who work for human rights and not forget the freedoms we often take for granted.

But we must also reflect on the *reasons* for that indifference with which many view the Church in our culture. Is it because, as Methodist missionary, E. Stanley Jones, once said, "We have inoculated the world with a mild form of Christianity so that it will become immune from the real thing?"<sup>6</sup> Could it be that today's church seems irrelevant because we have traded the gospel's message of liberation<sup>7</sup> for conformity and complicity with our culture?<sup>8</sup> In a society where you can *believe* what you want, to a degree, it really doesn't *matter* if Christians *believe* that Jesus is God and that he rose from the dead. The *real* threat is when Christians proclaim "Jesus is Lord and Caesar is *not*" since that challenges the *authority* of the status quo. Of course *we are* to be tolerant and respectful of others, the writer of 1 Peter says that too,<sup>9</sup> *and* we are to be *actively* engaged within society-at-large, but *not* at the expense

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

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Pet 1:14, 18; 4:3-4.

<sup>3</sup> The writer refers to them as "resident aliens" and "exiles." This was likely compounded by their inferior status: slaves – 1 Pet 2:18-25, and women – 1 Pet 3:1-6 owned by, or married to, non-Christian men.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Turn-Do-Seek-Follow.pdf> .

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, many are *more* effective and gracious than many "Christian" endeavours.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, (Abingdon, 2014), 90.

<sup>7</sup> See Luke 4:18-21. This is radical stuff, then and now. In the same way, the Sermon on the Mount is not a *private* message.

<sup>8</sup> Including prime loyalty to "the State," (cf. Christendom mentality.) Our security is *not* "in Christ" but in the world (mammon).

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Pet 2:13-17; 4:19.

of denying the core beliefs *and* radical practices of our faith.<sup>10</sup> *Living out* the gospel is likely to provoke a reaction, positive or negative, that is why the writer says: “Beloved, *don’t be surprised* at the fiery ordeal which is coming upon you to test you, as though this were some strange thing that was happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed . . . [for] you *are blessed* by God, because the spirit of glory and of God is resting upon you.”<sup>11</sup>

We have heard that mention of sharing in Christ’s suffering before<sup>12</sup>; Christ’s suffering was both an *example* for their suffering and the *grounds* of their – and our - salvation. In 1 Peter, there’s both a “now” and a “to be completed” vision of salvation in Christ Jesus; right now we experience suffering and joy combined, but at the end of time, when Christ will be all in all,<sup>13</sup> there will *only* be joy. The writer of 1 Peter always has one eye on the future, he is confident that God is guiding history and will bring it to completion. In light of that, we are to live in confidence and hope, whatever crises we are facing. For, as the author earlier puts it, “we are rescued through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, who *has* gone into heaven and *is* at God’s right hand, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him.”<sup>14</sup> And that assurance connects us to Ascension Sunday.

The final exhortations are perhaps familiar words to many and are, in my view, most encouraging. Whatever we may be experiencing, be *humble before God*, then, at the right time, God’s powerful hand will lift us up - or *exalt* us, just as he has *glorified* Jesus in the resurrection and ascension.<sup>15</sup> The writer then quotes the psalmist: “Throw all your care upon him, because he cares about you.”<sup>16</sup> God is mighty to save and our anxieties and sufferings have *not* escaped his notice. Leaping forward a couple of verses we read: “Then, after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you in the Messiah Jesus to the glory of his new age, will *himself* put you in good order, and *will* establish and strengthen you and set you on firm foundations. To him belongs the power forever. Amen.”<sup>17</sup> These words are most consoling in troubled times.

However, between now and that future date of God’s timing, the writer *does* warn of tough times ahead for *all* the faithful. He exhorts them “to be sober and alert. Your enemy, the devil, *like a roaring lion*, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour. Resist him, strong in your faith, because you know that

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<sup>10</sup> We have to *discern* what elements of our lifestyle are incompatible with the gospel.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Pet 4:12-14; NTE, NRSV, (cf. Isa 11:2). Note: for “fiery ordeal” see also 1 Pet 1:6-9; it is not clear if this trial is something new or a continuation of what they are already experiencing. Since it seems to be repeating the earlier point, I suggest the latter; however, in light of 1 Pet 4:7, we can’t rule out the former. Note too there is an eschatological element in the “glory” for the faithful here. See also Luke 6:22.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:18; 4:1. No one should seek suffering is a misguided attempt to imitate Christ! See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/As-Slaves-of-God-Live-as-Free-People.pdf> .

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Cor 15:8.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Pet 3:21-22, the author also connects this with baptism.

<sup>15</sup> Implicit – see [12]. The “glorification” of Jesus is a key theme in John’s gospel; see today’s gospel reading: John 17:1-11.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Pet 5:6-7; Ps 55:22; see also Luke 12:22–32.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Pet 5:10-11, NTE.

your brothers and sisters throughout the world are enduring the same kinds of suffering.”<sup>18</sup> I mentioned the sufferings of Christians in other parts of the world earlier. But the writer makes it clear here that God is *not* behind their suffering, he is *not* trying to test or trick them to see if they will pass or fail.<sup>19</sup> *Neither* is he saying their sufferings are *purely* down to the freewill of those in power who are oppressing them for following the Jesus way. Rather, he introduces “the devil” as being behind the scenes and describes him as a “roaring lion on the prowl.”<sup>20</sup>

People react in various ways on hearing the word “devil”! Because the devil is now often associated with a person in red with horns and hooves many, understandably, *don’t* take the devil seriously. Others invoke the devil ‘at the drop of the hat’ and give Satan *far* too much attention and credit. Both views are, in my opinion, a mistake. C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderfully clever book called *The Screwtape Letters* consisting of correspondence from a senior demon to a junior demon teaching him the art of temptation. Lewis *also* steers a wise path between these two extremes of dismissal *of* and fascination *with* the devil.<sup>21</sup> In the New Testament, the devil is a cultural portrayal of the dark power of evil that *opposes* God and generally impedes and frustrates the reign of God. In the last few centuries, not only has the Christian God been belittled or dismissed in our society, but so has the devil. After all, Materialism as a philosophy flatly rejects the existence of a spiritual side to reality.<sup>22</sup> But even if you don’t believe in a personal devil, *don’t* dismiss the power of evil that this figure represents. Evil is *real* in the sense that it is *experienced*. Just consider racism as an example of a pervasive, hideous, systemic evil which lies ‘behind’ those who harbour such thoughts and leads to vile actions. My favourite fictional radio detective is Father Baldi, and his Catholic take on the devil is that he “is often to be found in the Board Room these days,” meaning that those in power can be easily seduced by greed and self-interest in ways that wreak havoc on the powerless. I think he has a point and that is another example of the *de-humanizing* element of evil, something that *opposes* God’s desire for us to be truly human and experience fullness of life.<sup>23</sup> This may help us to appreciate the *meaning* of “evil” and that *resisting* the devil actually *enhances* life. On that note, *fear* does *not* come from God but robs us of his divine *peace*.<sup>24</sup> And that brings us back to the point the writer made a moment ago. Yes, we need to be alert and discerning as we step back and see the larger canvas that God is painting, something we often find hard to do in the immediacy of suffering and hardship, but we are also reminded to: “Cast all our anxiety on God because he cares for us.”<sup>25</sup> God *has not* forgotten us in our suffering. And never forget that God has *called* us and provides *grace* for each day and he will complete what he has begun.<sup>26</sup> Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> 1Pet 5:8-9. See also Eph 6:10–17; 1 Thess 5:6–8. (On “be sober and alert” see also 1 Pet 1:13; 4:7.)

<sup>19</sup> See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Asking-The-Wrong-Question.pdf> and James 1:13.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps an allusion to Ps 22:13; see also Matt 6:13.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis also points out the danger of two opposite extremes concerning Satan, who would be most happy with either; one is the denial that he exists and the other is to give him too much credit; Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, (HarperCollins, 1961) xi.

<sup>22</sup> The rise of – and fascination with – “spirituality” shows a culture that is rejecting the lie of philosophical Materialism.

<sup>23</sup> See John 10:10.

<sup>24</sup> See Phil 4:6-7; 1 Pet 5:7.

<sup>25</sup> See [24].

<sup>26</sup> On our “calling” see: 1 Pet 1:2,13; 2:9, 21; 3:9. God “completing what he has begun” see 1 Pet 1: 7b,11, 21; 4:14b; 5:1,4.