

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.

Our sermon text today is written in 1 Peter 3:13-22

Let us pray ...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight;
we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.

Blessed Are Those Who Suffer

This morning we are once again looking at St. Peter's first letter to the Christians that have been scattered around the region of Asia Minor. These Christians were in turmoil and were often struggling with the faith as they came under persecution. So, our Lord through St. Peter seeks to encourage them as they go forward as his people.

Likewise, this letter continues to be of encouragement for us as well, especially as we go forward having to deal with suffering and difficulty. Here as in many other places we are reminded that, as his followers, life will not be a bed of roses - that we will still face all kinds of hardships and suffering; in fact more so because we are Christians. We are told in the gospel according to Matthew that we have to take up our crosses in order to follow him. In other words, Jesus teaches us that life will not be easy - especially as a Christian.

Yet here he has something most surprising to say to us in this regard. It is good that we suffer! He says; For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. This of course should come as no surprise. As we hear in the gospel according to Matthew, while Jesus is giving His "Sermon on the Mount" He tells us *'blessed are those who suffer.'*

In other words Peter is telling us that if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, it is commendable before God. And that, to this you were called... This of course turns much of our thinking about suffering on its head and gives us a whole new way of thinking on how we should face life and its difficulties; and it helps us to be far more positive as we bear up against even the worst of what life dishes up to us.

Now if that is the case, we need to think a little more deeply at what he has to say to us. To give you some context, St. Peter in this morning's reading is speaking to house-slaves who were obviously being given a hard time by their masters simply because they had become Christians. But as we read St. Peter's letter it becomes evident that many Christians were coming under severe persecution, and facing other difficulties as well. They weren't yet at a point of being fed to the lions; but things were definitely progressing in that direction.

For us today we may not be facing open persecution for being a Christian. However, more and more of those who try to stand up for the truth are being given a hard time by the people around about them. It is becoming increasingly difficult to be able to stand by the truth of God's Word and the real Good News of the Bible without coming under some pressure from the world around us. On top of that we are living in a society which has been

loosing its way morally and ethically, (although that seems for now at least to have slowed somewhat) even though this is still creating enormous hardships for many people.

As well as that, many of us are struggling with difficulties and suffering that we have brought upon ourselves. All too often we are the source of our own suffering, and here St. Peter tells us that there is no credit due to us when we suffer in those situations. Instead we need to recognise that this is our own fault, as we say in the confession of sins: “We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have failed to do. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves”.

Some examples of this would be: if we drink and get drunk, then we must expect to have a hang over. Or if we slack off at work or pilfer from the till, or not give the service that is expected, then we shouldn't be surprised if we get into trouble with the HR department and receive a DCM (don't come Monday). Or we treat others poorly and are disagreeable and quick to anger, should it be any wonder that people avoid us or react violently toward us. Time and time again we bring suffering on ourselves in many different ways, and as Peter tells us there is no credit for us as we bear these. Instead all we can do is to seek forgiveness and ask for God's help to improve ourselves.

But there is another suffering that is often faced in life, and that is suffering for when we do what is right and good. This is the suffering that we find difficult to handle. A person works hard and makes a success of their business, and yet gets ridiculed for it; rumours are spread and lies are told. Or a boss yells and screams at you and gets you to do all the horrible jobs because you are a threat to their position. Or you are a good person – honest, caring, hard working, with no enemies, but even so you get struck down with cancer or some other illness. I am sure that we could all add other examples to this list; and it is stuff like this that gets to us, doesn't it?

However Peter tells us that when in the midst of this suffering we are conscious of God this is a truly commendable thing. When we take what is thrown at us and bear up to it in a Christian way, knowing for sure that God is with us, this is something very good. This is what we are called to do as Christians. Through endurance in what is good, in the face of difficulty, commendation comes of it.

How can that be? How can we bear up to the pain of unjust suffering in this way?

Well here we are reminded that we have a great and glorious example in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose steps we are called to follow. But most importantly, he went through it all: suffered and died so that we might be forgiven for our sin and have the assurance of eternal life with our God forever. No one, and nothing, can take that away from us. So even if they take our physical life from us, they cannot take the promised eternal life with God from us.

As we look to the reading for this morning, we hear of what Jesus went through. *For Christ ... suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.* Here we are told that Jesus was one who committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. When people hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made

no threats, but simply entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He in no way deserved any of what came his way, yet he bore everything that was thrown at him; placing himself before his heavenly Father's will.

Even though it cut him to heart and sweated blood over what was before him. And even though he cries out in agony and pain on the cross - he bears it all. He bears our sins upon himself and He takes all of the punishment that we deserve on himself. He goes to the cross and is forsaken by his heavenly Father. All so that we now can have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation: so that we can have healing - true healing: the healing and peace that we really need.

By His sacrifice, we have now been returned to the great Shepherd and overseer of our souls. Jesus did it all. He took it all for you and me. He took it because of God's love for us all. He wants us to be his very own and to be able to live the way he wants: the right way for us to live at peace with each other and with our Lord: And so that we can have the assurance of eternal life in heaven.

Now then, we can die to sin and live to righteousness. We can face everything that is thrown at us; and instead of falling into sin - now as we are conscious of all that Jesus has done for us we can bear it all. We can live for righteousness – we can live a God pleasing life in the midst of suffering. Instead of getting angry and upset by the injustices handed out to us, we can follow Jesus example, because we know that in him and through him we now have hope for the future. It doesn't matter what is throw at us. As we follow his way and example, and bear up to it; we now have the assurance of his grace to help us, and his commendation as we do.

But more than that, through bearing up under suffering, we are allowing God to use that situation to make others think about what is important in life. As others see that, as a Christian, we are able to cope with our suffering, God is able to work in these people's lives. When they see that, in Christ we have everything that is important to us, that He is the giver of everything that gives us hope, God enables them to see that Jesus Christ and his death on the cross is important for them too.

Therefore, as you face your suffering, be strong; look to Jesus as your example and follow him. All the while, remembering that through Jesus and his suffering and death you have been returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. You are now safe and secure because of him and in him. To him be all glory and honour now and forever.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.