

Worcester Cathedral  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday 30 April 2023

1 Peter 2.19-25, John 10.1-10

Good Shepherd Sunday. What could be nicer for a preacher than to find myself on the rota on a Sunday known for its pastoral, caring images. Sheep, shepherd, care and love. Good shepherd Sunday is surely the best of the Easter Sundays. I had hoped that I would find the wonderful passage about the 'hireling, he who is not the shepherd, who leaves the sheep and flees'. It is classic childhood humour and a lovely image of the hireling running away from fleas. But sadly that is next year's gospel for the fourth Sunday of Easter and today I have no such opportunities to find humour in the mis-hearing of scripture.

In fact today we have one of the potentially dangerous texts in scripture, not in the gospel, but the epistle. A reading which is tricky in the short passage we have before us, but disturbing when set in the context of the rest of the first letter of Peter. It reads as if to say, 'put up with suffering, it is good for you'. My pastoral idyll of Good Shepherd Sunday did not last long. Here in today's eucharist we have heard some of the toughest verses of scripture and I would not be following the example of the Good Shepherd if I were to ignore them.

Many of us will wrestle with passages of scripture and find, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, our way of understanding; whether that be by delving into the context of the author and audience; the broader message of the text rather than its literal meaning; or the brushing aside of texts which simply do not draw us closer to God. There are times when we may decide to simply ignore scripture: the temptation to cut out passages of huge discomfort is great.

If only that were possible. Paul tells us twice in his letters that all scripture is written for our learning. Thankfully in his letter to Timothy he adds a qualifying word which I hope will help us to deal with today's passage. Here, Paul writes that 'all scripture is inspired by God and is *useful*'.

Useful feels like a good word. It is one step down from necessary, and those of us who have found ourselves on the sharp end of the abusive use of scripture will be grateful to St Paul for qualifying how the Bible is to be read. We must not then abandon the text, but find in it what is useful. What is useful in 1 Peter 2?

It is almost universally accepted that Peter did not write this letter but that is the name we have attached to it, so I shall use that. The author is writing to a group of new Christians, converts from other faiths or pagans. It is this freshness of faith which makes them vulnerable, and we see clearly that there is a fragility about their Christian community because they are under pressure – enough pressure perhaps to make them reconsider their profession of Christ as Lord.

They are pressured and persecuted and so the letter's writer is keen to explore the suffering they are undergoing and align it with the suffering Christ willingly accepted in his life, but most significantly in his death: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness'. They must accept suffering and align it to that of Christ. In doing so they will be strengthened and become more and more like Christ.

But there is a further aspect of this suffering which comes out more clearly as we read the rest of Peter's letter. This suffering is no doubt great, great enough to make them reconsider their baptismal call, but the writer urges them to accept and even relish this suffering, for in doing so they provide the strongest witness to the life of Jesus – the imitation of Christ is a powerful evangelism which strengthens their witness, and in doing so builds up the Church. Already we see the hazards ahead: suffer because of the faith and you increase the message of the Cross.

But it does not stay there and we see in this letter the kernel of a dangerous message which has come down through the centuries and continues to misinform the Christian community.

As this letter continues, the writer, starts to use the glory of suffering as a means of control. The reasons for doing so appear harmless, even beneficial: if Christians accept suffering then we will be given an easier ride, persecution will stop, and ultimately Christ's redemptive act will triumph.

But at what cost? The cost is not to the writer obviously. It is to women and slaves. The letter lays out in detail how wives must submit to husbands, and how slaves must respect the authority of their masters – even if they are harsh. The already powerless are scapegoated; they become the price that the rest of the Christian community pays in order to be accepted and eventually to thrive. It is an abominable horror.

The reasoning behind this glorification of suffering is conformity – conformity to the prevailing understanding of the place of women, children, and slaves in the household at that time. Anything which challenges this societal norm makes Christianity dangerous and prone to persecution. Conforming to this norm, however wicked, is framed as a spiritual duty.

Conformity is a two-edged sword. On the one hand we feel attracted to conform so that we live an easier life, we fit in, we are spared embarrassment, and we are – on the face of it – accepted and normalised. For many, this is a comforting conformity. But we also know that conformity brings with it the life-diminishing problems of blandness at best, or of complicity at worst. Conformity may make an easier life for some, but at great cost to others.

We clearly see slavery as evil today, and although we have moved forward in equality for women we continue to see the ongoing discrimination of misogyny in the work place and at home. It seems almost impossible to us that the early Christians did not think as we do – surely slavery and the oppression of women are obvious evils?

But the early Church was still powerless to change things, and so caught up in the expectation of the immanent second coming of Christ that the sufferings were so temporary as to be almost welcome. After all we know that Christ's suffering was – and is – redemptive; it is through his suffering that love triumphs over hate, life wins over death. 'Bear with it – all shall be well'. But although we believe and know that to be true in the end, it is not true in the present: in reality victimisation does not lead to vindication for millions of women, neither is it true for the millions of people exploited in modern day slavery.

This letter of Peter presents the acceptance of suffering as a panacea and, as we understand more fully our safeguarding responsibilities, for us to use such scriptures as a form of control or acceptance of the abuse, domestic or otherwise, is not just immoral, but abhorrently evil.

'Brothers and sisters: It is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly' so begins today's epistle. Well St Peter, or whoever wrote this letter: no. I shall not accept this on face value, and I struggle to find in it teaching which is useful. But I am left with this letter in the New Testament, and which has been read aloud in churches around the globe this morning.

Thomas á Kempis writes, '*In the holy Scriptures, truth is to be looked for rather than fair phrases. All sacred scriptures should be read in the spirit in which they were written. In them, therefore, we should seek food for our souls rather than subtleties of speech*'. But it seems that the spirit in which the first letter of Peter was written is not one which sits easily with our modern understanding of suffering, or the position of women and slaves. The world has moved on and our Christian understanding has changed significantly from those earliest days of the infant Church.

The key to the usefulness of all scripture is to set it in the reign of Christ. The light of the resurrection casts its beams across all scripture and teaches us to read through this lens of triumph, liberation, and freedom. The risen Lord stands above scripture, and he invites us into a new and living way into his presence. We do not ignore the biblical passages which discomfort us because of this, but we begin to see them in the ever-brightening light of Christ's resurrection.

I am left asking myself if I should dismiss the first epistle of Peter or not? Is this letter writer the hireling we should not follow? The stranger from whom the sheep run because they do not recognise his voice?

Perhaps it *is* for our learning – a text which should bring us up short and make us question our relationship with scripture. But the real issue is not that we test scripture, but that we are challenged to test our experience of the Risen Christ as the Good Shepherd. The one who cares for his sheep, the one who is compassionate, merciful, and perhaps most importantly of all, liberating.

There is only one test, and that is about hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, the one who says to us 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. Nothing else will give God glory.

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