

1PETER 3:13-17 CBC 5.7.2020am

Read 1Peter 3:13-17 ...

Peter's theme in these verses is confident Christian witness in a broken and sometimes hostile world.

"Oh no", you think, "we're in for 20 minutes of being made to feel guilty!" Because while some people seem to be natural evangelists who easily get into gospel conversations, most of us aren't like that. We're not bursting to start a gospel conversation with the person in front of us at the supermarket checkout: "*I see you've got chocolate Hobnobs in your basket – you should taste and see how good the Lord is!*" There are people who can get away with that, but most of us cringe at the thought. We find it hard to share Christ at the best of times. But if Peter's going to ask us to be witnesses even in the worst times, we want to run away and hide. We remember missed opportunities and embarrassing failures when we became hopelessly tongue-tied.

But you can come out from behind the sofa! Peter isn't setting us up for a guilt-trip. He wants to help us, not burden us. We won't find a more sympathetic teacher anywhere. He understands our struggles. Because what strikes me about this passage is how much it must have cost Peter to write it. He cannot have written these words without thinking back to the courtyard where he sat warming himself by the fire while Jesus was on trial for His life. How painful that memory was!

- He writes (v.14) "Don't be frightened!" - but he was terrified!
- He writes (v.15) "Be prepared to give an answer" - but he wasn't ready or willing to do that!
- He writes (v.15) "Do this with gentleness and respect" - but he was angry and cursing!
- He writes (v.16) "Keep a clear conscience" - but he had a very guilty conscience!
- He writes (v.16) that we should make our opponents ashamed – but he was the one who was ashamed, and fled in tears.

You see? Peter gives us a list of things to do, and he himself did none of them. He failed at every point. Peter understands our struggles to witness.

Yet he could also recall how the risen Lord gently restored him and said, "Feed my sheep." And Peter learned that Jesus was patient with him and could change him. He learned that sharing the gospel during hostile questioning really is possible for weak, flawed, failing people like us. Read Acts 4 and you'll find Peter arrested and questioned by the same people who had arrested Jesus. And see how Peter has grown as he boldly replies that Jesus is Saviour and Lord!

And it's the combination of these things that make Peter such a great teacher. He understands our weakness because he has the same struggles as us. But he also has experience of God growing him and he can share that with us too – not from his high horse looking down on us, but walking beside us with an arm around our shoulder.

Well, naturally we want Peter to tell us what made the difference. The answer is found at the beginning of v.15: "*In your hearts revere Christ as Lord.*" We don't *make* Jesus Lord – He already *is* Lord – but we bow to Him as Lord, and we grow increasingly to delight in Him as Lord. This is what transformed Peter. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, confirmed to Peter beyond doubt that Jesus is Lord of all. And that made him bold to share the gospel, whether preaching to the crowds at Pentecost, or testifying to his accusers in the courtroom. That's how the new Peter was born!

Make no mistake, brothers and sisters: if you really believe Jesus is Lord and bow to Him as *your* Lord, it will change your life!

1. Revering Christ as Lord will make you a person of CONFIDENCE

vv.13-14: *Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."* Good living ought to be praised, and thanks to the common grace of God it usually will be. But Peter is realistic enough to know that in a fallen world, perversely our goodness and godliness will sometimes meet with persecution.

Well, says Peter, don't be frightened. v.14 alludes to Isa 8:12-13. Ahaz, king of Judah, faced invasion and was terrified and was on the verge of making bad decisions. That's what fear does to us, as Peter well knows from his denial of Jesus. So Isaiah warned Ahaz not to give in to fear, and Peter does the same for us.

But he doesn't stop there, because simply telling people not to be afraid isn't usually very effective. So he tells us *how* to overcome our fear – v.15a: “*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.*” In other words, if opposition comes, remember that your persecutors aren't Lord – Jesus is!. Can you imagine how emboldened Christians would be if we really believed that? I can't believe Jesus is in charge and simultaneously believe my persecutors are in charge. If Jesus is Lord, they aren't! That's where courage comes from! It's an example of how practical theology is: doctrine should be life-changing.

2. Revering Christ as Lord will make you a person of HOPE

v.15b *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.* Peter assumes that we have a hope which makes us different from people around us. What does he mean? He doesn't mean wishing for something that may or may not happen, like wishing for a fine day. He means waiting patiently for the inheritance that's guaranteed to us in Christ. Remember 1:3-4? *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*

That's YOUR hope, when Jesus is your Lord. It's based on something unchanging – the resurrection of Christ. Which means the difficulties of life (e.g., Covid-19) shouldn't diminish our hope. It's a hope that will not disappoint us.

And here's what this means: When Jesus is Lord of our lives, each crisis becomes an opportunity for witness. Because when Christians behave in a crisis with faith and hope, unbelievers sit up and take notice. Because they don't have this hope.

We live in a world marked by hopelessness. The greatest issue is death, which comes to us whether we're rich or poor. In the face of death the great majority of people are without hope. They don't want to talk about it. All the cheery humanist funerals in the world can't disguise the fact that for the person in the box, it's OVER. There's no hope for them personally. If this world is the only one there is, then suffering has the final say and all of us are a sorry lot.

But Peter says we've been born again into a living hope! Sin is forgiven, death is defeated, eternal life is ours through Jesus Christ. Easter tells us that the last chapter of God's story will be wonderful. Jesus' resurrection guarantees it.

And this hope sets the Christian community apart. Not the absence of suffering, but *hope* in suffering. Because if you truly revere Jesus in your heart as Lord over sin and death and everything evil and destructive, it's bound to make a difference to how you live.

Every day we meet people who have no hope. And Peter says that when they see you're different, they'll wonder why – and some will ask! *Of course, if they don't see you living differently, with a different hope, they won't be asking questions!* But if you live believing that Jesus is the risen Lord, they'll notice. “*You live in the same world as the rest of us, but you're hopeful and courageous and kind and forgiving – what's going on?*”

The question doesn't often come with theological trimmings. It's often a question or comment about something else that's really asking about the hope that's yours. “*Why won't you tell a lie?*” Or, “*How do you keep your patience with that horrible person?*” Or, “*I've noticed you don't get drunk at the Christmas party like the rest of us ...*”

And Peter says, “*Always be prepared to give an answer!*” I don't think that means having your *answers* prepared; rather, having your *heart* prepared to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. And you do that by revering Jesus as Lord in your heart. I hope that's a relief to you! You don't have to know the answer to every

question, though it's no bad thing to study some apologetics and to think about how you might respond to common questions. But it's impossible to prepare every answer in advance, as Jesus said. But it's not impossible to prepare your heart by revering Jesus as Lord. And if you do that, you'll be glad to confess Him as your Lord whether you're in the law court being prosecuted for your faith, or on the tennis court chatting with a friend.

Incidentally, note that Peter tells us to give an answer, not an avalanche! Conversations don't work when sermons get thrown in the middle of them. There's a place for systematic gospel presentations but that's not usually where we begin and not what most opportunities to share the gospel consist of. No wonder it feels unnatural if that's what we're trying to do.

Don't force what isn't wanted. Just offer a nugget: *"I'll pray for you."* Or share something Jesus said. Sometimes less is more. A gospel answer rather than a gospel atom bomb.

3. Revering Christ as Lord will make you a person of GENTLENESS

v.15: *"Answer with gentleness and respect"* - a kind answer is always better than a clever one or a crushing one. And it's what we'll give if we truly revere Jesus as Lord because He was gentle with the broken.

Think of the missional impact of simply speaking kindly. For many people, insults and outpourings of bile have become the norm. Revering Jesus as Lord makes us different because He's the Lord of love. He teaches us to treat everyone with dignity and gentleness. To come alongside them rather than standing over them. To be patient with people who don't get it, because only God can change their heart.

An old children's hymn declared, *"Jesus wants me for a sunbeam!"* Too often, I haven't been a sunbeam; I've been a smart aleck. Peter not only tells me to be different, he gives me the remedy: revering Jesus as my Lord.

That's what enables us to live with courage, hope, and gentleness. The way to be a bold witness in a hostile world is not to try harder to be brave, but to think much of Christ.

And then do you see what happens? You have a clear conscience (v.16), because you've behaved consistently as one who lives under the Lordship of Christ, rather than as a hypocrite. *Would your church family recognise the 'workplace' version of you? Would your work colleagues recognise the 'church' you?*

But while honouring Jesus as Lord means a clear conscience for you, it puts your accusers to shame (v.16). And that's a good thing if it silences their slander and leads them to repentance. Better to be put to shame now than on the day of final judgement.

And so Peter concludes v.17 *For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.* Why? Because suffering for doing wrong is unremarkable – people expect it. But being willing to suffer for doing good is so remarkable that it's a witness. It shows that Christ is worth more than comfort, more than an easy life, more than anything. And that witness may lead hungry, thirsty people to salvation.

PRAYER: We thank you Father for the living hope that is ours in Christ. May your Spirit enable us to press so deeply into this hope that our lives are changed by it, and others are drawn to Christ. For your glory's sake. AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- What difference has your hope in Christ made to you during Covid-19?
- What stops you sharing the hope you have when there's an opportunity?
- How would your life be different if you really didn't fear anything because Jesus is Lord?