

1 Peter 3:13-22**A hope-filled witness**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the letter that I wrote to the parish just before the Easter weekend, I mentioned the hope that we have within us even in the midst of a very difficult time for our society. Our way of life has changed, but because of Christ's death and resurrection, we are not led to despair by our present circumstances, but still live in hope. This means that our present time of restrictions and social distancing has been a time of great opportunity for people to witness the hope that is within us. Those around you do see how you approach life, and when they see such firm faith even in difficult times, they are bound to be curious. And so, we have this encouragement from First Peter chapter three:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

(1 Peter 3:15)

From the opening words of his epistle, Peter has emphasised the living hope of all believers. The unbeliever does not enjoy this hope but has only an empty way of life, one of spiritual darkness. So, in these chapters of First Peter, one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian is their possession of hope. And here, this hope is to be so real and distinctive that non-Christians will be puzzled by it and ask for an explanation. And we should seize these opportunities of witnessing that are present in these kinds of situations. But our response should be filled with 'gentleness and respect', so our text says.

When we give our answer, it's not about demonstrating how superior how worldview is, or how much of the bible we can quote. Responding with gentleness and respect means there is no room for us to respond with arrogance or even anger towards someone who is not of the faith. It's about seeking the spiritual good of those who might question us. And it realises that whatever answer we give is done in the presence of God, and so we should say only that which is acceptable to him.

Perhaps it's helpful to think of what you shall say to God on the last day. Where does your hope lie? Where do you look for salvation? This is a good reminder for us that the witness we are called to give here in First Peter is not about being seen to be morally upright, or holier than everyone else, but to live in hope. Our answer before both God and neighbour cannot be to point to our own good deeds, because ultimately, they are not enough.

The language here in First Peter is similar to that of a courtroom. In the Greek, we are to give an ἀπολογία (apologia), that is, a defence, a formal statement given before a magistrate to defend against legal accusation. For some of Peter's original audience, this was literally true. Accusations were made against them by those who were enemies of Christianity, and they had to defend themselves in court. But here he says we should be ready to give such a defence before anyone who asks. And we should be ready because this is about truth being proclaimed. And we should be ready because this may be of great eternal benefit to the one who is asking.

Some see your hope and are jealous, but that can go two ways. They can want what you have, and sincerely question you to understand what gives you such hope. Or they can want you to have what they have, which is no hope, and so question you as to destroy all your reasons for hope. Or in the case of Peter's original audience, they probably want to lock you up or put you to death for being an enemy of the state. But Peter is not calling here for a battle of intellects. This is not about reasoning and proving that the faith we hold is correct and right.

There will be those who are so completely blinded and hardened that they will not accept any response we may give that comes from the Word of God. And it's actually not our job to win such a battle. If the question is about the hope that is within you, then the answer doesn't need to be anything more than the promises that are given to us in scripture. We confess what we believe from the words of scripture, and if they want to believe, all is good, but if not, we don't need to give them anything else.

We know that the Holy Spirit works through the Word, and it's only the Spirit who can soften a hard heart, and bring faith to life where there has been nothing but sin and death. We can't force it to happen, and we shouldn't be disappointed in ourselves if and when it doesn't happen. We are called to gentleness and respect. Perhaps we should rely on the words and the promise of Christ in Matthew chapter ten, where Jesus says:

When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

(Matthew 10:19-20)

Knowing all the right bible verses to prove any aspect of your faith can be useful, but it can also become a point of pride, and all you end up confessing is your own wonderful abilities and not your reason for hope.

Perhaps the reason for the hope that is within you is the same at St Paul in Romans chapter eight:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38-39)

Perhaps the reason for the hope that is within you is the same as Job, as he faced immense loss and suffering:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.

(Job 19:25-26)

Perhaps the reason for the hope that is within you is the same as the disciples in John chapter six, saying to Jesus:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

(John 6:68)

However you express the reasons for the hope that is within you, may the Spirit enable you to do so with gentleness and respect.

But what if even in doing that people still revile you for the faith you have? For that, we simply read our text again and see five main points. Do not fear. Remember that Christ Jesus is Lord. Remain hope-filled and willing to explain why you are still positive about life. Keep on doing good so you will have a clear conscience, and your enemies will be ashamed. And finally, remember that it's better to suffer for doing good than to suffer because we had committed some wrong. This was Peter's advice to the Christians in the early church who lived in a world full of many lords and gods. But by speaking of their hope respectfully, humbly, and honourably, those who belong to Christ will remain above reproach even if they are slandered by neighbours and family members. The hope held out is that their honourable behaviour will in the end put to shame those who slander them.

Nothing much has really changed in 2000 years. The lords and gods might have different names, but people still worship all sorts of idols. And even if we found ourselves deprived of honour, of our livelihoods, of everything we own, and even of our lives, we still have a possession that cannot be taken away from us.

Those who are enemies of the faith have only their possessions on this earth, and afterwards, they have nothing. But we who have faith in Christ Jesus, who belong to the one who died and rose again, we have an eternal and imperishable possession of life in him. And so, we have hope. We cannot do anything else. We are safe in Christ Jesus, knowing that he is Lord over all things and that he holds us in his care. This is the good news of this Easter season. This is why we have hope even in our current situation. And this is why some will want to know the reason for the hope that is within us. So may God our heavenly Father grant us his Holy Spirit, so that we may respond with gentleness and respect, pointing not to our own efforts, but only to Christ Jesus our Lord. And may we always give thanks praise and honour to Jesus for all that he has done for us. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.