

Vicar's Reflection May 17, 2020

Always be ready to defend the hope that is in you, and when you assert your defense, do so with gentleness and reverence. This is the counsel from the first letter of Peter to the new Christians living in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) in the end of the first century.

“Defenders of Hope” -- this would make a good username, a handle, for followers of Jesus Christ. Christians: find us at defendersofhope.org. And these defenders are to be armed with gentleness and reverence, hardly the superpowers from which legends are made. Yet here we stand in the 21st century, once again being called to defend, if only to ourselves, the hope that is in Christ, in the face of all sorts and conditions of evil and suffering.

Hope is what 1 Peter is offering in a letter circulated to scattered Christian communities. The author writes to those he calls “exiles in dispersion,” newly converted Christians now finding themselves out of sorts, in conflict with their once familiar Greco-Roman society and culture. If not direct persecution, they are being outcasted and verbally abused. No more worshiping the temple gods, no more Roman society, and no more status. They are kicked out of the party, out of the club; cut off from former neighbors, friends and family. They are exiles in their own land. How do they live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, when they are suffering under these trials and hardships? How do we remain hopeful, they are asking?

In response, 1 Peter teaches hold faithful to the core convictions of your faith, and this means suffering too. And be clear, suffering does not come from God, and God cares for and protects those who suffer. Stand faithful, for the time of suffering will be short, 1 Peter consoles. And like the wisdom teachings, 1 Peter suggests that suffering can refine faith, like precious metals refined in a hot fire. And on a deep level, in suffering, they share in the suffering of Christ, which Christ endured for and like humanity.

Despite the gems within this letter, 1 Peter has some rough spots, among the epistles, those letters of teaching and encouragement, many which were written to new Christians struggling or suffering because of their faith. Even Matthew wasn't so direct to say, blessed are you who suffer. Likewise, 1 Peter's writings on slaves, wives, husbands, and submission to authorities, leads to criticism and the need to balance those teachings within the historical context and with other more just biblical teachings on those subjects.

But we would be missing out to ignore 1 Peter and its comments on suffering. Suffering after all is a deep question, the quandary of most religions. During this COVID time, I have once again picked up the *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, which describes conversations between the world's foremost Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile since 1959, and Desmond Tutu, the former Anglican Archbishop of South Africa during and following apartheid. These two men have endured more than their share of suffering, and yet they exude joy, and are continually seeking and finding it. In Archbishop Tutu's words, “Discovering more joy does not save us from the inevitable hardships and heartaches. Yet, as

we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.”

This gets me back to 1 Peter and what he says about the “hope that it is you.” The Hope that is in you, this Hope of Christ, is more than wishful thinking. It is a confidence that what God has promised has and will be -- new life, light, and loving presence, to name a few. Hope is related to faith, and it is not a blind faith. Hope is faith founded on what we have experienced, what we know to be true, what we trust. Hope is a confident expectation of better things to come.

And joy is its by-product, a fruit of Hope. In this [hope] you “rejoice” 1 Peter writes. In worship we affirm this Hope and the joy it brings, in the closing words of Morning Prayer, as we said today: “May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. *Romans 15:13*”

How can we be joyful in times like these? Yes, these are difficult times for many, who are suffering now and who will suffer. But I have to ask, how can we not seek joy, seek the joy that comes from belief in the Hope that is Christ? The signs are there for us to see.

So, when asked, put to an accounting, let us consider the words of 1 Peter, who counsels do not be afraid, and be ready to be defenders of Hope, not as braggarts insensitive to the suffering of others, but with gentleness and reverence for one another and for the God of all, in whom we put our Hope. AMEN