

1 Peter 5:5-11
Third Sunday after Trinity, Holy Cross Anglican Church
July 10, 2011

Being a Christian in the Greco-Roman world was, to put it mildly, not easy. Granted, it is thought that at the time of the writing of our Epistle for this morning, Christianity had not yet become an *illegal* religion – we can determine that it was written before any systematic attempt to stamp out Christianity had begun. That would come later. But there were still persecutions against Christians – generally, they were irregular, intermittent, usually the result of mob violence rather than formal accusations. Christians, as a rule weren't liked very much in their communities. To the pagan of the Greco-Roman flavor, you were viewed as an atheist – after all, Caesar was not Lord, Christ was. To the Jew, you were just a part of that sect whose Teacher was nailed to a Roman cross, and that was just, in their eyes, shameful. You get the point. Christians were complete outsiders – they were foreigners, strangers. Hence the persecution.

So what do you say to Christians who are suffering persecution in that kind of environment? Well, that was the task before St. Peter when he sat down to write the epistle from which we read just a moment ago. And so, St. Peter, guided by the Holy Spirit in effort to encourage these suffering Christians, discusses three general themes in this epistle: he talks about the nature of their sojourning, the nature of their submission, and the nature of their suffering – sojourning, submission and suffering.

And so he begins by addressing his letter to “the *pilgrims* of the dispersion.” Pilgrims, sojourners, outsiders, foreigners, strangers. St. Peter understood that *this* was the *nature* of the Christian existence as citizens of another Kingdom, and by the way he addresses them in the first sentence of his letter, he reminds them of this crucial fact. And it's a recurring theme in the letter. In another place he tells them to conduct themselves in the fear of God during their “stay here,” again picking up on the theme of their being sojourners in a foreign country. And later, he encourages them to abstain from fleshly

lusts, and to have honorable conduct among the Gentiles specifically *because they are* sojourners and pilgrims representing a higher, heavenly Kingdom. It's as though Peter is rather directly telling the brethren, "this is the way it is when you are made for another place – when you are a sojourner. It was this way with Christ the true Sojourner, and so it is with you."

Peter's first main admonition to them is to remember that they had been "*begotten* to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that does not fade away" reserved for them in heaven. He encourages them further by reminding them that they are "kept by the power of God through faith for salvation." "Therefore," he tells them, "gird up the *loins of your mind*, be sober, and rest your hope *fully* upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." For He who called you is holy, so you be holy. He tells them that they are a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" which were called out of darkness into His marvelous light. Peter is telling them that they are living the chosen life – a thing so easily forgotten when you are persecuted. We are often so shortsighted. But Peter here reminds them of the big picture of Christ's plan, and to live like Christ Himself.

And it is interesting that he tells them that the fruit of that kind of conduct is rooted in submission: submission of citizens to government, submission of servants to masters, wives to husbands, husbands to wives, and Christians to one another. You can imagine that there was the tendency or the desire to rebel – to push back against the persecutors. And Peter, who once drew his own sword in defense of a submissive Christ, is now admonishing these brethren to be submissive in all areas of their lives. You remember that we are told in Hebrews 5:8 that Jesus Himself submitted, and in so doing suffered, and in suffering, we are told, He learned obedience. And this is precisely what Peter wants these brethren to learn.

And so it is with us. As a chosen people, sojourning down here for a time, it is to be *expected* that we will suffer persecution, because Jesus Himself suffered persecution. At

one point in the epistle we notice that these Christians were surprised at the persecutions which were coming upon them. But Peter tells them in chapter 4:12, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the *fiery trial* which is to try you, as through some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice in that you are *partaking of Christ’s sufferings*, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” So for these brethren to suffer was to take a part in Christ’s sufferings, and that is part and parcel of the Christian life. And Peter’s point is, of course, that this is something not to bemoan, but to glory in, indeed to be joyful over – that you are counted *worthy* to suffer with and for Christ.

And by the time we get around to Peter’s thoughts from our Epistle this morning, we find ourselves at the very end of his letter. He’s wrapping up his thoughts, and giving the brethren some closing exhortations. And he does this by addressing two groups of people in the churches to which he is writing – the ministers and the flock. The first part of chapter begins, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a *fellow elder* and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed.” The word used here for ‘elder’ is presbyter, and it refers to the leaders of the Churches, or we might say, the ministers of the churches. Notice here that Peter refers to himself as a *fellow presbyter* with those to whom he is addressing.

And this is what he says to these presbyters: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

But to the flock he says, “Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” The phrase, ‘clothed with humility’ has reference to the apron that slaves would wear while serving others. The idea being that we must tie humility upon us like an apron – it must be closely bound around us so that

we would be willing to submit to even the humblest of duties for the sake of others. Indeed, we are told to humble ourselves under the might hand of God that *He* may exalt us. We are told to cast all our cares upon Him because he cares for us. And remember that this is all in the context of suffering under persecutions, so this is the cause of the cares or anxieties which these brethren are told to cast upon the Father.

And then Peter gives this most interesting admonition: “Be sober [or self-controlled], be vigilant [or watchful], because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” This is quite an image of our adversary, isn’t it? And it speaks a great truth as to the ravenous nature of our enemy, and how he seeks the one, like our Gospel reading mentioned, who has left the flock – the lost sheep. But we are told to resist him, firm in our faith. Understand here that Satan is linked with the persecution and suffering of Christians, but we are told that the devil will flee from us if we resist him.

And then finally, we are told that after we have suffered a little while in our sojourning down here, we will be rewarded, indeed, *perfected* or completed in Jesus Christ.

Truly this little Epistle of Peter’s is so rich. I encourage you to go home and read it in its entirety. You will be encouraged because, just like the brethren to whom Peter was writing, we too are sojourners in a foreign land, we too undergo trials and endure suffering. And Christ promises we who have been called to His eternal glory, that He will perfect, establish, strengthen and settle us at the last.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit +