

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Christ's return

Dwell on the idea that God might be in the room with you, in the person of Jesus, or perhaps with the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing. As you think about these things, begin to praise God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and call on Him to return.

For myself

Pray for the people who make a difference in your life. Each one of us has contact with many other people, but only a few of them make much of a difference to us, and we generally know it. Pray for such people.

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, pour out Your gifts on Your people throughout the world, those who seek to do Your will and change the world. You are looking for people who will do Your work in this world effectively. So, come with the fire of Your judgement on all imitations of religion whether inside or outside of Your church, and come with the wind of Your power to sweep away all false religion and leave behind the pure Gospel truth. Hallelujah!

Meditation

Lord God, Holy Father, Almighty Saviour and Lord;

Our lives are nothing without the power and drive of Your redeeming love, by which we are saved.

Our spirits crave the creative power of Your Spirit like a plant needs water, and an artist a canvass:

Our souls desire the love and care of the Creator cherishing, cleansing, nurturing, empowering:

Our bodies cry out for the healing of the Saviour, restoring flesh and bones, and speeding recovery:

Our minds love the challenge of a life lived for You, Intellectual, practical, pragmatic or reflective:

Thank You, Lord, forever and ever; so be it, AMEN!

Bible Passage

1 Peter 4:1-6

¹ Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body (and because whoever has suffered in the body has finished with sin) you should equip yourselves with the same attitude ² in order to live the rest of your earthly life no longer by human passions but by the will of God.

³ You have spent enough of your past lifetime doing what pagan Gentiles like to do, by living in offensive behaviour, covetousness, drunkenness, revelry, intoxicated orgies, and forbidden idolatry. ⁴ They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excess and reckless living, and so they blaspheme, ⁵ but they will have to give an account of this to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead! ⁶ This is the reason why the gospel was proclaimed to those who are now dead, so that although their earthly life had been judged just like everyone else, they might have the chance to live in the spirit, like God.

Review

These are very powerful words which demand our close attention, for although Peter spoke them to baptised converts many years ago, as scripture they speak directly to our own times and to many people in our troubled and complex world. It is tempting to take this text in isolation and focus on the plain message it gives about rejecting the ways of the world; however, we must remember that Peter's message is part of a wider call to the Christian community to be united in Jesus Christ, and what it means to be baptised as a follower and disciple of His.

In the light of everything Peter had said to those who heard him or listened to him, he described the church of God as a community of people united in suffering (4:1). Through His suffering on the Cross Jesus had done away with sin, and Peter therefore emphasises the message that has been present within everything he has said to the slaves and married women he addressed earlier (2:18f.). Through our baptism we identify with Christ, and from that moment onwards we submit to a higher authority than this world; we live 'no longer by human passions but by the will of God' (4:2). We have had our time living according to the standards of the world (4:3) and should now know the difference between the things of God and the things of this world. Baptism is the moment when we make a clear distinction between the two, and decide which master we will follow.

This message is one which is hard for people to understand, and as Paul says about the Gospel in his first letter to the Corinthians, it is 'foolishness' (1 Cor 1:18-25). The reason for this is because our identification with Christ is one based on suffering (4:1), and the whole of worldly life is invested in the avoidance of suffering. The behaviour described by Peter in verse 3 is fuelled by alcohol and the desire to have a 'good time' partying (revelries), and taking hold of the luxuries of life while you can if only for a moment (covetousness) etc. People who gain their satisfaction from life in such ways simply do not understand those who can find fulfilment in suffering! As Peter says; 'they are surprised that you no longer join them ...' but this is only so if a Christian has made the choice and separated themselves from past life. Unfortunately there are some who still try and keep one foot in the world as well as one foot in heaven. It does not work.

Peter explains that the reason for our need to make a clean break with the world is because all must give an account of themselves. Those who have rejected God and live in sin have no testimony to offer but that of selfish and reckless living which has collaborated with the sin within them to create enmity with God who is the Judge! Those who have been baptised testify to sufferings born both for Christ and with Christ by which they are saved; and they plead Christ's sufferings as the justification of their faith.

Finally, Peter finishes this passage with a comment about the 'fairness' of the Gospel. He pointed out that those who died before Christ were given the Gospel by Jesus when He died so that they had a chance to live 'in the spirit' (4:6). This was an important matter for early Christians, for their forebears and loved ones of previous generations did not have a chance to respond to Jesus and the Gospel in their lifetime. Following what he said in the previous passage (3:20:21) Peter's words gave them the reassurance that God was fair and just in presenting the Gospel and dealing with those who had died. We shall look at this later in the study because what Peter says is close to being controversial, but Peter is always insistent. Salvation is through Christ and Christ alone.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *'Christ suffered in His body'* Most translations have 'suffered in the flesh', but I reckon that Peter means here the death of Christ, and so the Greek word 'sarx' normally translated 'flesh' refers to Jesus' ultimate physical suffering, that is, the death of His body.
- V1 *'(and because whoever has suffered in the body has finished with sin)'* This phrase is awkward, and stands at the end of the verse in Greek, and this is where you will find it in many translations. However, I believe this is an example of a comment from Peter which nowadays would be placed in parentheses, and by placing it where I have done so in the centre of the verse, you can more easily understand the flow of Peter's letter from verse 1 to 2 – see notes below.
- V2 *'for earthly desires'* This phrase links directly with the previous verse because the word for 'earthly' is the same as that in verse 1 for 'body'; the Greek word 'sarx'.
- V3 *'doing what pagan Gentiles like to do'.* The word for 'Gentiles' is 'ethne', but I have added the word pagan because the verse emphasises the difference in conduct between Christian Gentiles and their neighbours, in other words, pagans.
- V3 *'offensive behaviour'* This Greek word is usually translated 'licentiousness' or 'debauchery' Yet because these two words are not commonly understood, I have preferred to 'explain' them with the phrase 'offensive behaviour' which covers all manner of things. This is appropriate to the structure of the sentence.

The sufferings of Christ in His body

The main force of what Peter says here in the first two verses of chapter 4 is that the Christian must be prepared for suffering and be aware that when it comes it gives them an opportunity to bear witness to Christ, and to be purified from sin. The equipping we should seek is to have the same attitude towards suffering as Jesus had (4:1). Now if we look at Jesus' life and ministry, we will see that in most of the Gospels. Jesus was acutely aware of the fact that he was going to Jerusalem to die. He certainly struggled with this when the time came (e.g. Matt 26:36f.), but he knew exactly what He was doing when He spoke to the disciples about His coming death for the salvation of the world (e.g. Matt 16:21, 20:17, Luke

18:31f. etc.). Jesus knew what He was doing and He did not shirk the responsibility of suffering for the world, knowing that it was prophesied beforehand by Isaiah (Is 53) in almost graphic detail.

Sometimes, Christians will say that although Jesus was called to suffer 'unto death' for others, such a call was unique and we are not called to do the same. I am not sure this is how God sees it, because whatever happens to us, we are to live in the knowledge that our suffering is part of Christ's suffering for the world and one day this will certainly include death; we cannot escape it! When we come to die, our baptism is made real, and we become immersed in the death of Christ, by faith, and are thus born again into our resurrection body. Our death, whenever it comes, is linked to that of Christ, and at the very least our witness of faith in death is a powerful statement to the world of the truth of the faith we have lived. To this day, it is likely that a Christian funeral service, whatever the tragic circumstances of a person's passing, can be a service of glory and wonder like no other.

Clearly, Peter assumes that God's people have made a clear and distinct decision to put aside the ways of the world and identify with Christ. It is not possible for any of us to completely destroy the 'human passions' (4:2) which remain within us because we have not stopped living in this world and our senses are aroused by our surroundings. However, what Peter is talking about is the governing authority which rules our thoughts and words and actions. Being a Christian is a matter of letting go of that rule oneself and giving that rule to Christ; then human passions can be overtaken by heavenly ones, and the fulfilment of a heavenly call will satisfy in a way that no earthly experience can match.

The ways of the world rejected

The list of the ways of the world given by Peter is heavily influenced by alcohol! Three of the six words used imply drink; 'drunkenness', 'revelry' (drunken partying), and 'intoxicated orgies' (fuelled by alcohol). It is sometimes said that the Bible says little about alcohol, but where it does condemn drunkenness and the overuse of alcohol, as here, it is damning.

People have always struggled with issues to do with personal sin and how to overcome it, but we cannot escape the seriousness of the challenge to separate ourselves from the immoralities of this world. Peter presents a forthright challenge in verse 3 to do away with the lifestyle of godlessness and all forms of drunken and licentious behaviour, and although it is easy to read this passage and agree with its moral advice, what is described is still perilously close to the lifestyle of many people today, including some who claim Christ. Many Christians find it extremely hard to separate the life to which they are called from the social world within which they have been brought up and continue to enjoy themselves. 'Why is it wrong to get a bit tipsy?' some will say. 'Why does Christianity mean I cannot have a good night out?'

Yet this text is one that should alert the mature Christian to the seriousness of letting our personal lives be governed by the world rather than the Lord. The trouble with drunkenness, covetousness and the other sins mentioned in verse 3 are that they are the consequence of minds and hearts that are not fixed upon the things of God; they are fixed on the pleasures of this life. Where are our priorities? Having a good time now or standing tall through the troubles of this world in order to be strong in Christ and inherit eternal life? There are many other earthly obsessions which are equally dangerous to the spiritual life; obsessions which may be called 'reckless living' (4:4), when people take something that is inherently good and make of it an idol; something which is easily done with music, sport or computers, or sex for example. Unless we are able to stand above these things and consciously live by God's standards in all things, then we are living wide of God's mark.

The Gospel proclaimed to those dead

In yesterday's passage, we read Peter's comments about Jesus preaching to 'spirits in prison' after He had died and before He appeared to the disciples on Easter Sunday morning. When we read this, it appeared that Peter was speaking about a general appearance of Jesus in heavenly places, including the lowest ('prison') to preach and announce the Kingdom. Here, the concerns of the people Peter was addressing were slightly different, and the meaning of Jesus' preaching the Gospel to 'those now dead' (4:6) is a little different.

As we will find out in tomorrow's passage, people were expecting the Lord to come again very shortly, and they commonly believed that He would transport Christians directly to heaven so that they would not face death. They were convinced (wrongly) that if someone died before the second coming of Christ, they would miss out on the great 'Resurrection'. In other letters of the New Testament, Paul wrote to allay such fears, particularly in his letters to the Thessalonians. Here, Peter sought to calm such concerns by saying that God was fair, and Jesus' command of heavenly places and His preaching to the dead (see yesterday's study) meant that all who had responded to Jesus in life and had died (and therefore been 'judged' – see 4:6), would still have the chance to 'live in the spirit'. God had not forgotten them!

Discipleship

Application

Christians living in the world

One of the best ways we can help each other put aside the ways of the world and live according to the values of the Kingdom, is to develop a strong Christian community life in which people's social and spiritual needs are met, and people are cared for as a matter of course. This is the general picture of the Christian community presented in Acts 2:42f. and 4:31f. Of course, this does not have to be, and perhaps should not be an exclusive society as if God's people were completely withdrawn from the rest of the world of work, politics, and economics, for example. However, by developing a good, open and responsive community life, God's people can model the fact that it is possible to have a good time without getting inebriated!

The reason why it is important for us to know where the boundaries are in all this is because if we do not take control of our lives and submit all things to God, then the enemy will quickly take control of anything we do not put into God's hands. It is in his interests to use whatever he can to draw us away from the Lord and create discord within our hearts and our souls. In reality, I do not believe that it is wrong for people to enjoy themselves appropriately in the world's social environment, providing as Christians, we are very clear about the boundaries the Lord has asked of us to reflect our Christian faith. For some that may mean limits to drinking alcohol, and for others this may mean they will not join in certain activities which are excessive. Each of us needs to put these things before God and know where we stand, according to His word to us.

Ideas for what to do

- *If you are someone who drinks alcohol on a regular basis for leisure, then try 'fasting' from alcohol for a period of time as a discipline to the Lord, and seek His guidance.*
- *Reflect on the ways in which someone close to you suffers for their faith, either in health or in persecution at work, or some other way. How can you help them?*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of the dangers of the worldly life are most prevalent in your society and most dangerous? How should the Church deal with this?
2. How may we make sure that we do not live according to our 'earthly passions'?
3. Look up Jesus' teaching about the salvation of our forefathers in Luke 16:19 (the rich man and Lazarus), and the actions of Jesus after He died (Matt 27:52f.). Does our passage today say the same?

Final Prayer

Save us, dear Lord, from believing that we are so mature that the challenges of Scripture do not apply to us, but only to others. Give us a true spirit of grace by which we apply truth personally before looking to others; and may the example of our lives be worthy of Your name. We ask this through Jesus, our Lord; AMEN.