

“DISCIPLESHIP – THE BASICS: 2 - WITNESS”

1 Peter 3:13-22

Why are we all here this morning? There are plenty of other things to do on a Sunday morning, so why get together here for an hour or so? Well, three people are here to be baptised. We've heard already from Peter, Vicky and Charlie what that's all about. Some of you, who've seen this kind of thing before, are here to listen to the stories that have been told. Every time someone is baptised, they tell a different story and it's good to listen to what has been going on in these people's lives. Quite a few of you, I'm sure, are here out of curiosity. Maybe one of the people being baptised has invited you and you're quite intrigued as to what might happen. (I had a friend who was Greek Orthodox priest who came along quite eagerly to a baptism service at the church I was part of in London because he had heard that we baptised people naked!)

Whatever our particular reason for being here, the underlying reason is the same: we are here to witness something. Peter, Vicky and Charlie are here as witnesses, if you like. They want to say something in this act of baptism about what they believe. The rest of us are here to witness them, to see what happens, to hear their stories. Some of us know what's going to happen; some of us don't. Baptism is an act of witness – that's why we do it in public rather than privately in their homes. But it's still rather a curious ritual, isn't it? What exactly is behind it? Well, we've explained a bit about it already, but what we're doing now is what Peter says we should do in the words we've just read.

St Peter was one of the leaders of the very first Christian community. He'd been close to Jesus when he was around and after Jesus had returned to heaven Peter was one of the people who took on the task of telling others about Jesus – about his teaching and about the significance of his life and death and resurrection. As part of what he did, he wrote a couple of letters which circulated around the new churches which were springing up all around the Mediterranean area. And in those churches all sorts of new things were happening – including baptisms very much like this. Peter knew that some of the hostility which was shown towards Christians was due to people not really understanding what Christianity was all about and jumping to all sorts of wrong conclusions about what the Christians believed and did.

So he wrote to tell the Christians that they should, as he says here, *“always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”* In other words, make sure people don't misunderstand you or jump to the wrong conclusions by telling them what it's all about. These three people who are being baptised today have a hope, they have something they can look forward to, something they believe in. And that is true of many of you in this church today – you have a purpose in your life, you have a focus for your belief and behaviour. So you should be ready to tell other people what it's all about – especially as that belief should make a visible difference to the way you live your life each day and others may, indeed, become curious as to why you do (or don't do) certain things, why you act as you do, where your attitudes come from.

And what is this reason, then? What's the basis for this hope? Well, the whole of the Bible is taken up with that, really. We could spend ages trying to explain it in minute detail and for two thousand years theologians and preachers have been doing their best to sort it all out – often with some pretty heated (and, indeed, violent) disagreements. But Peter sums it up very succinctly in what we've just read. What's it all about? Why are these three people being baptised? What's the reason for the hope that they and millions of other Christians have? Here it is, in v18: *“Christ died for sins ... to bring you to God.”* That's what the Christian hope is all about. That is at the heart of all Christian witness.

You see, when the word *“hope”* is used in the New Testament it's not an airy-fairy kind of hope – “well it might happen if we were lucky, but we can't be sure”. It's a real, solid, certain hope – something that we are sure will happen, something guaranteed. And in this case it is guaranteed by God himself. As human beings, part of the reason for our lack of fulfilment in life, our lack of satisfaction, or sense of lostness, if

you like, is that we can't be sure of the future. We don't know what's going to happen. And that leads to anxiety and worry, particularly about death and what might happen afterwards. Those who follow Jesus have a sure hope that ultimately they will spend eternity with God.

Peter writes that Jesus Christ has brought us to God – he has guaranteed us access to God, which is what's at the root of the Greek word Peter uses here. The relationship with God that was intended for human beings, the friendship and intimacy that was built into creation at the very beginning, has been broken by the presence of evil in our world and its effect on our lives. We've got into a position where we can't really enjoy the friendship with God that we should because our attitudes and our actions are so tainted by our seemingly innate selfishness. That's what the Bible calls "sin" and it is, unfortunately, part of the experience of each and every one of us. It prevents us reaching the full potential of our humanity, it stunts our personal growth, it affects our relationships, it cuts us off from God.

And the reason for that – for being cut off from God – is that right in the beginning, before evil had got the grip on humanity that it has, God said he could have nothing to do with evil. What's more, he would have to punish anything tainted by sin. When human beings started to express their selfishness by sinning, he had to keep his word and, as we've said, the rift between us and him became complete. That's why we are now less than God really intended us to be, we do not achieve our full potential as human beings.

But God sorted out a way round this. He allowed his Son, Jesus – part of his own being – to come into our world and show us what life could be like. He taught people. He gave people glimpses of what life would be like in God's Kingdom, when our relationship with God was restored – that's what the healings and the miracles are all about. But what really made the difference was that, in the end, he died and took on himself the punishment that was really due the rest of humanity. That's what Peter means when he writes that Christ died "*once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous*".

So disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians, try to follow his teaching and live as he asks us to **in response** to what he has done for us in bringing us back to God, restoring that broken relationship, giving us a hope for the eternal future. We can, once again, experience what it is to be fully human as God wants us to be. Now that doesn't mean that we don't face problems, we don't experience frustration. But we do know that one day God will sort it all out and we will have the opportunity to be with him for ever. That's the hope that we have – and the reason for the hope is Jesus and what he's done

That's what we are witnessing this morning – three people who have a hope, a belief, and who want it to affect every part of their lives. They don't necessarily understand it all – I don't think anyone really does. So much of it is a mystery to us (and if two thousand years of theology still hasn't managed to explain everything, we're certainly not going to succeed in an hour this morning), but we can still put our faith in it and experience it. I'm useless at science and a particular idiot when it comes to physics. I have no idea how electricity works – but I know it does and I make full use of it in all sorts of ways at home. My lack of understanding of it does not mean I don't enjoy the benefits of it. Don't feel you have to get the whole Christian thing sorted out in your head before you let it affect your heart. Let what you have witnessed this morning make a difference to your life and give you a hope for the future that goes on into eternity. That's a decision I don't think you'll ever regret. And those of you who have taken that decision, be ready to tell other people about it.

(Sorry – no discussion notes this week.)