

27.01.13 11.00 am 1 Peter 2 v11 – 3 v9

Representing Jesus in a Non-Christian / Secular Society

Today is Holocaust Memorial Day, when we remember the horror of so many people (Jews and others) being exterminated because of religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability. The threat to the Christians to whom Peter was writing has many similarities (though not in scale).

Peter writes from Rome around AD 63. In the following year much of Rome would be destroyed by fire, thought to have been caused by the Emperor Nero himself – because he wanted to rebuild the city. He needed a scapegoat and blamed the Christians, who were already being targeted following the realisation that they weren't just a sect of Judaism, which was a legal religion. A great persecution of Christians followed, during which they were hunted down and cruelly killed by horrible methods; it's likely that Peter himself was killed (according to tradition, crucified upside down) during this wave of persecution, which started in Rome, and spread to other provinces. The recipients of Peter's letter were mainly Gentile Christians, living in different parts of Asia Minor – now Turkey. Peter is warning them to expect persecution, encouraging them to stand fast in their faith and advising them how to live.

The culture of the time was much more hostile to Christianity than ours, though perhaps things are gradually changing. There are secularists who are eager to pick up anything that can be used as an accusation: **I recently read a newspaper article which suggested that Christians approved of genocide because of some of the OT accounts of the way the Israelites took over the Promised Land. R4 Sunday prog. (this morning): increasing challenges to faith groups delivering public services – fear of proselytising.** We need to be prepared, as Peter says in 3v15,16 to answer to our accusers, but to do it with gentleness and respect.

Although there's been a change, we're still very far from under active persecution. **Two weeks ago 4 Christians went to the European court because they believed they were being discriminated against in the workplace – and many of us have sympathy with their cause.** But, although losing your job is no light matter, they still have the right to act according to their conscience; so perhaps this is marginalisation rather than persecution? But we know that there are many parts of the world where our Christian brothers and sisters fear for their lives because of their faith. As a very recent example, **reliable Christian organisations report that in parts of Mali the rebels have been going from door to door warning Christians to leave if they don't want to be killed.**

Peter writes to encourage the Christians and, despite our different circumstances, he can encourage us too. In Chap 2v10,11, Peter reminds them that it's not surprising that they feel like aliens and strangers in their own culture - because they're now citizens of God's kingdom. Remember that the culture of Peter's

readers was pagan; if we don't feel totally alien, that's perhaps because our Christian heritage still influences so much of our culture. **A recent survey of 2,000 Christians in the UK found that 54% were concerned that becoming more Christ-like would increasingly alienate them from the culture around them! I'd have thought that was fairly obvious, and I don't know what the question was, but does it mean that we're becoming afraid to be Christ-like in case it makes us feel alien? Let's hope not!**

Peter's concern is that the Christians should live in such a way that the non-Christians around them will see their good behaviour and reject the rumours about them (which included cannibalism – a misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper) and false accusations. And his chief aim is that this good example will win others to Christ.

So, to these 1st Century Christians, and to us, **Peter says, first:**

Don't assimilate (*morally, anyway*) 2v11 'Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.' He lists some of them in chap 4 v3: 'In the past, you were guilty of sexual sins and had evil desires. You were getting drunk, you had wild and drunken parties, and you did wrong by worshipping idols'. Peter is very straightforward - and many Christians today could say, 'Yes, much of that was me before I became a Christian'. Look at v4: 'Unbelievers *think it strange that you don't do the wild and wasteful things that they do. And so they insult you*'. It's particularly hard for young people in a society that is genuinely *surprised* at the idea that sex is only for marriage, that 'getting drunk' isn't the best thing to do on your birthday, that not all the available 'entertainment' or everything on the internet is appropriate or helpful. So the church is accused of being repressive, anti-sex, anti-pleasure, total killjoys. We need to help new Christians to understand – and also remind ourselves – that many of these things are good gifts from God to be enjoyed but not misused and others are best avoided. Note that Peter reminds his readers that they were once like this; we're to be distinctive but not self-righteous.

But this is far from a negative letter. **Next Peter says, Get involved!** – v12, 'Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God' (an echo of the words of Jesus in Matt 5). There's a reason for good behaviour. The Christian life isn't negative. We shouldn't just 'not be bad' but be a positive blessing to those who don't yet believe, says Peter.

He tells us to do this by obeying the current human authorities (2v13) even if they are harsh (2v18) and by showing respect to everyone (2v17). Just a word of warning on harsh treatment. Most of our country's laws are still based on Judeo-Christian values, which was very far from the case in Peter's day. So it isn't necessary or right to put up with *serious* ill-treatment at work or at home or to

allow others to do so; abuse of any kind should be reported to the proper authorities (though it's to our shame that such reports haven't always been taken seriously). We may feel very critical of our country, often with justification, but we take for granted so much that's good. **In the last couple of years, Paul and I have been in Cambridge during the week looking after grandchildren, so we had the privilege of getting to know lots of parents at the school. One day Tanya, a young Muslim woman, suddenly flung her arms round me and said, 'Thank you for having me in your country'! Now, clearly it was nothing to do with me – she just wanted to say it to someone! She went on to say how wonderful the provision was for her child with Downs Syndrome. 'In my country', she said, 'he would be shut away and there would be no help – here I get all the help I need'. She's impressed by a country with Christian values. A practising Muslim, she asks lots of questions about Christianity and her daughter goes to the midweek club at the local church.** I do believe that a warm Christian welcome would have made a great difference to the relationships between the different communities in this country – and hopefully it's not too late!

In the passage we read Peter refers to **3 areas of life where we should be representing Jesus:**

- as citizens (subjects/king/governors)
- at work (slaves and masters)
- in the family (wives and husbands)

So first, how can we represent Jesus as citizens? (2v13-17). **'Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men'** - and in this case the emperor was Nero! As we know from Acts, Peter's proviso, of course, was that obedience to God takes precedence. So, he says, we should obey the authorities except when we're asked to do what's against God's laws. Clearly, what Hitler was doing was against God's laws and many priests and pastors and other Christians defied him (speaking out or hiding their Jewish friends) and many paid for it with their lives. In previous centuries, some Quakers and others in the USA refused to pay the war tax – and suffered for it too. We probably won't agree with everything on which our taxes are spent, but we do know that they help many who are in need, including contributing to overseas aid – so perhaps we should pay our tax cheerfully, knowing that we're being good citizens! In a democracy, we have a right to vote for our leaders and to try to get the law changed through petition and legal protest. It was very different for Peter's readers. But he *still* asks them to obey the king and governors (v15) - so that by doing good they will silence the foolish talk of ignorant men (a reference to Christians being misjudged). I dislike the expression 'do-gooder'. I know it's taken on a pejorative meaning – but good is what we ought to be doing! We represent Jesus, who went about doing good. And it does change people's attitudes. **The media is not always very positive about Christians! But when Radio 4's iPM programme awarded their own New Year Honour this year, they chose a Christian! and gave an amazing amount of air-time to what he does. Stu Thomson runs a youth club on a deprived S. London estate to help teenagers**

who've grown up in a culture of violence. These are youngsters who have to be persuaded to part with their knives at the door - and no-one is turned away. Why does he do it? Not for the honour – he was delightfully underwhelmed by it – but because the club is a place where lives are changed and it's what he believes God wants him to do. (You can still catch the story on iPlayer, 5 Jan). There are so many opportunities for Christians to be good citizens. For some, it will involve national or local politics: a hard place to be a Christian, and such people need our prayers. We've already prayed for those who work in education – and we should continue to do so: they are representing Jesus to a large sector of our society.

Our son and his wife have a Christian friend called Ruth. She and her family moved into a fairly deprived neighbourhood (where Al and his family now also live). Ruth sent her children to the local school, became a parent governor and then Chair of governors. Our grandchildren now go there, too, and Al is a parent governor. And the point is this: the school is improving - and that has much to do with the time and effort Ruth has put into it over many years. It's great to have opportunities to evangelise (and Ruth's church does run a Christian club there) but as Christians we are also in society (representing Jesus) to make things better, to improve people's circumstances and life-chances. Change takes time, but in very practical ways we can be salt and light in our community.

Peter's letter is about encouragement and we should be encouraged, too – though not complacent. People in Lichfield comment on the contribution of this church - in serving lunches, running a toddler group and so much more; the wider church contributions: the prison work, the late-night listeners – supporting without being judgmental – are greatly valued too. I know that a number of Christians are local Neighbourhood Watch officers; and the fact that someone bothers to get out of bed to check that all is well when an alarm goes off is usually appreciated, even if not particularly useful! Many volunteer in charity shops, and so on. Even if we feel we can't do some of these things, we can all be good neighbours - there for people when they need us. Of course, none of these things are exclusive to Christians: we are all made in the image of God. But Christians are called, not to show what nice people we are, but to represent Jesus. It's good to have Christians involved in every legitimate activity in our society: if we're spending all our time with other Christians we're not spreading the salt and light very far.

Yet this can all be very parochial. As Christians, we need to represent Jesus in the wider world as well. We've already sung, 'With a prayer you fed the hungry'. This is God's world - and we readily pray that his kingdom will come on earth, as in heaven. You may have had an email about the IF campaign or seen it advertised in other ways. This past week, 100 development and faith groups (including Tear Fund and Christian Aid) have launched a campaign to begin the end of world hunger - and will lobby world leaders at the G8 summit in June. It's a bold aim but a laudable one. If we are to represent Jesus to a suffering world we should be involved in his work of feeding the hungry, healing the sick and bringing peace wherever we can.

Secondly, how can we represent Jesus at work? (2v18-21 [Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters.](#)) In the Roman Empire slaves would have included doctors, teachers, accountants, actors – so, unless any of us are landed gentry, we could have been included. Some slaves were well treated, others not. (As an aside here, this and other Bible passages have in the past been used to justify slavery. Peter was writing about the situation as it was, not as it should be. Two commentaries on this letter, written in 1959 and 1987, refer to slavery as, ‘a thing of the past’! Last month the Tear Fund website stated that ‘there are more people in slavery today than at any other time in human history’. [Just last week there was the news of the beheading of a Sri Lankan domestic worker in Saudi Arabia for an alleged offence.](#) We should not be deceived by slavery under other names - forced labour or human trafficking - and we should support the renewed efforts to abolish it in all its forms.)

The word used here by Peter refers to household servants. Slaves were completely the property of their masters, they had no choice but to obey, so we have to look at principles rather than parallels. So how do we represent Jesus at work? By being good employees, even when we disagree with the Boss, even when we feel we’re being unjustly criticised or things are not quite fair! In our society, employers have the right to expect a good day’s work and employees have the right to expect a fair day’s pay. Today we have the right to question authority, but we should still do the work that’s expected of us. In Ephesians 6, Paul says that slaves are to obey, not just when the master’s eye is on them, but as if they were serving Christ. So when we’ve done a fair day’s work we don’t need to leave the jacket on the back of the chair! In chap 2, v19 and 20, Peter says that Christian slaves should be prepared to put up with injustices because Christ gave us an example of enduring suffering when he had done no wrong. [Does that apply to work situations today? You might like to discuss that in housegroups.](#)

Peter doesn’t mention masters here, but in similar passages in Ephesians and Colossians, Paul tells masters not to threaten their slaves and to provide them with what is right and fair – because they also have a Master in heaven. Bullying at work is never acceptable (and it may be the role of the Christian to stand up for someone who’s being ill-treated). If we’re managers, we represent Jesus by treating our staff well. It’s easy to get too busy to make sure new staff are coping, that people aren’t over-stressed by the latest round of changes, or working ridiculous hours.

We *all* represent Jesus by being honest, reliable and hard-working, by not over-claiming on expenses or helping ourselves to small bits of equipment – because everyone else does it. It’s very easy to be drawn into complaining about management or gossiping about colleagues. Peter’s advice is a counsel of perfection, I know – and we can all think of times when we haven’t been good representatives of Jesus at work. But it’s OK to fail and try again – as Peter would have been the first to admit! We should feel free to ask other church members to pray for our work situations, as long as we don’t break confidences.

Finally, how can we represent Jesus in the family? (Chap 3 v1-7, [wives, submit to your husbands; husbands be considerate](#)). This can be the hardest place, where people know us best. Peter writes in the context of a wife or husband who has a non-believing partner. It may be that much more space is given to the wife's situation because hers was the more likely. Women literally belonged to their husbands at the time. So, if a man became a Christian, his wife and household would attend church, too – and would probably readily accept his faith. But Peter still tells Christian men to be considerate and respectful to their wives (v7). This would be revolutionary advice in the Roman Empire: a man could divorce his wife on the grounds of the slightest annoyance. For a Christian wife, as far as submitting to her husband's will was concerned, she didn't have a choice: like slaves, wives were the property of their husbands, but Peter is telling her to submit willingly, with the right attitude, so that her behaviour would win her husband over. (I liked *plaque in OXFAM shop 'My husband wears the trousers in our house, but I tell him which pair to put on!'* Not sure it was like that for Peter's readers, though I expect many women had ways of coping with being 'owned').

The extra note to wives on outward adornment in chapter 3 v3-4 of our reading is relevant to Peter's main point. He isn't saying, 'Just let your hair look a complete mess, don't wear any jewellery or attractive clothes'. *I can remember a time when that was the way some Christians read this - and our youth group had serious discussions about whether Christian girls should wear make-up! (No! – wedding photos!)* Peter is talking about getting their values right, saying that their beauty shouldn't *depend* on these outward things. He is advising the women not to go to excess – not to spend too much of their time and their husband's money (it was his then) on hair, clothes and jewellery. Apart from it being wasteful, their non-Christian husbands will be more impressed with what he calls their inner self, their personality and attitudes. *Even Christian husbands raise their eyebrows at the cost of a modest hairdo today (though some would do well to recognise why their haircuts are so inexpensive!)* The society of the time was very focused on image and luxury. (Nothing new under the sun then!) And today we're constantly bombarded with 'must haves' (a phrase I hate) and the need to perfect our image. The principle of getting our values right applies to men and women alike.

And the purpose is to win their partner for Christ. I know there are people here who have been 'won over' to Christ by the faithful witness of a husband or wife. So, if you have a partner - or a family member - who isn't yet a Christian, don't give up! It's best not to preach too much! Leaving Christian books around the place or worship songs on the CD player can be a turnoff! – as can being out at church meetings several times a week! Every relationship is different, so we each need to work out the actions that will speak *for us* – as Peter says (3v1), that [they may be won over 'without words'](#) by your behaviour. Perhaps we can support each other as we pray for our families?

In 2v17 Peter says, 'show proper respect to everyone'. And he uses the word again referring to slaves respecting masters (even those who don't deserve it) and to husbands respecting wives. Of course it's fine to joke, but we frequently hear people rubbishing leaders with whom they disagree - or speaking about their boss, or wife or husband in ways that are demeaning. Peter would say, 'Don't do it – because you're representing Jesus' – in society, at work and at home.

Sometimes people give you a hard time when you're trying to live for God. It may not bear any comparison with what Peter and his readers were about to suffer - but it doesn't feel good. What should we do when people treat us badly or insult us? Well, says Peter (3v9), you should **repay evil ... with blessing**. So instead of thinking up ways of getting our own back (the natural reaction), we should be thinking what kindness we can do! There's a challenge! – and a difficult one.

But, says Peter, all this is because Jesus gave his life for you, has forgiven you and has given you a living hope. And it might just surprise someone into wanting to know more about Jesus!

Questions for discussion

- 1 Do you see Christianity as under threat in our society? If so, in what ways?
- 2 Peter says that Christians are to obey the human authorities (2v13-17). Can you think of circumstances when our obligation to the authorities might conflict with obedience to God?
- 3 Should Christians be prepared to suffer injustice at work? (2v18-21)
- 4 How could the church help you more to cope with your work life?
- 5 Do you think Peter's instruction to wives to submit to their husbands (3v1) still applies today? Why?/Why not?
- 6 In what ways could we be more effective representatives of Jesus in our community?
- 7 We can pray for Christians who are being persecuted. Can we do anything else?