

Easter 2

I take as my text today from St. Peter's first general letter:

....but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my redeemer.”

Today is considered Good Shepherd Sunday by the theme common to both the Epistle from St. Peter and the Gospel from St. John, as well as the lesson from Morning Prayer.

The ideal Shepherd is one who loves and cares for his flock. Jesus Christ was appointed by His Father, called, and sent, and it was to Him that the care of all his sheep was committed, entrusted, and it was for the sake of the Father's sheep that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave up His life, freely and voluntarily.

The shepherd was not only the protector of the flock, but, in the time of Christ, he was literally the door to the sheepfold. He blocked the entrance to the sheepfold with his body. It was through him that the sheep entered and exited.

Thus, it is with the shepherd in the fields with their sheep with whom Jesus compared Himself as the Good Shepherd. Jesus, as he said, was the door to eternal life through which His sheep would enter.

In the Church today, the bishops are inheritors of the commission to be the shepherds, from the Apostles through two millennia to the present, in unbroken succession. Our bishop, the Most Reverend Mark Haverland, stands in that line connecting him through the ages to the Apostles.

Few bishops, indeed, live up to the Apostolic mantle as does our bishop, truly committed to the care of his flock.

Of course, he does have some assistance here, at All Saints', with his yapping sheepdog, the rector, tasked with keeping the flock in a straight line.

When we look at the short passage, just a few verses from St. Peter's Epistle, it's truly amazing that Peter and Paul, James and John, as well as Matthew, Mark, and Luke, could write just a few verses that would stir up those who read them to write volumes trying to explain their meaning and implication. We find this especially in the passage we read today from St. Peter's First General Epistle.

Moreover, there is an interesting connection between the passage we read this morning and the one we read next week from the same chapter. We may note that the order of the selection is reversed: today we read verses 19 thru 25; next week, we read verses 11 thru 17.

What is strange is the obvious omission of verse 18 from either readings.

In the passage for next week, verses 11 thru 17, the emphasis is on Christian Duty, noting that Christians should be dutiful in subjecting themselves to the state; that doing so, regardless of whether the punishments meted out were just or unjust, would be a demonstration of character and would win respect.

The passage selected for this week's Epistle is a reminder that we have been delivered from the bondage of sin; yet we are still subject to the tribulations inflicted upon us by an unbelieving world.

The verse omitted by the framers of the 1549 Prayer Book is verse 18:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.

While seeming to tie the two passages together, if included in either reading, it would seem to change the context by putting an emphasis on the societal slave-master relationship, rather than on the spiritual relationship between the bondage of sin and the Christian's duty in a persecutory world.

How does the Christian demonstrate that he is both in the world and apart from it at the same time?

Peter says that Jesus Christ set the example that we should follow as proof of who and what we are.

Truly, St. Peter could not be expecting us mere mortals to attain to the same heights as our Lord and Saviour did. But we do need an example to follow, or try to follow, else we would flounder in a world that is hostile to God's expectations.

We do have a duty as Christians. St. Peter summed it up in verse 17 that concludes next week's Epistle passage:

***Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God.
Honour the king.***

Indeed, this one short verse sums up our duty to God and our duty to our fellowman.

While what is in our hearts is concealed from examination, the judgment that the world passes on us as Christians is derived from the observation of the manner in which we perform our Christian duty.

If we fall prey to hypocrisy, we will be seen as failing in those areas that are concealed from view: the content of our hearts, our devotions, the subjugation of our evil passions, our individual communication with God, our faith itself.

If we are **not** seen as following in the steps of our Lord, then we will be judged as possessing a religion of little value.

Christ, our example, did no sin; though reviled, He reviled not; though He suffered, He did not issue threats, rather He accepted the judgment passed on Him; He bare our sins and died that we might live.

Christ was seen as the Suffering Servant and we, as servants of Christ, follow in His steps. Though He was perfect, we can only attain to that perfection.

As we undertake the perfecting of ourselves for Christ, we take on a new attitude: the attitude that whatever we do, in word or deed, everything must be done in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Christian Ideal, whatever we do is done, not for ourselves, but for God. Our conviction must be that whatever we do must be done so as to be able to show it to God without shame.

Most certainly, in our efforts to be true to our convictions, we will inevitably be subject to insult and injury. The measure of our faith in Jesus Christ will be how well we accept insult and injury without complaining, steadfast in our unfailing love of God, and with unfailing love in our hearts for all of His creation.

To follow in the steps of our Lord may seem to be a daunting task but Peter assures us that, while we may have gone astray in the past, we now have Jesus as the Good Shepherd calling us back from our wanderings and leading us into those green pastures.

And Peter calls Him Bishop, from the Greek word *episkopos*. It is a word with a long history but in the context of St. Peter's Epistle, we might say that as Bishop of our souls, Jesus is our Guardian, our Protector, our Guide, and our Director.

As Bishop, He has oversight of our souls; indeed, He is the overseer of souls. Jesus Christ, as Bishop and Shepherd, knows our wants and wishes; He knows the dangers we face, and He leads us, guides us, and defends us; He even laid down His Life for us.

Most of all, He loves us and is the fulfillment of all love.

We were sinners gone astray but now we are returned to Him. If we are to realize the expectation of God's Love and Care, we must complete our conversion by dying unto sin and living unto righteousness and following in the steps of our Lord.

Here, in this small church, we come face-to-face with our Christian duty to worship God, our Creator, where we can bring our battle-weary souls and, for a moment, escape the slings and arrows that assault us daily.

Here, in His Presence, we are fed and nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ, and are encouraged by the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we may be able to endure with patience the sufferings of this present world, and in the end attain to life eternal with the Shepherd of our souls.