

Everyday Church

Reflection

Take time together to read Romans 5v1-11

As you read reflect on who Christ is and the salvation we have received through him. Respond by praising and giving thanks to God.

Hope at the Margins

Read 1 Peter 4v1-5v14

Reality

The letter that Peter writes brings a good dose of reality. He writes to believers who have been 'scattered' because of their faith in Christ which has left them as 'strangers' in the world. Being a Christian is not easy, it is tough, and the reality is it will get even more difficult. We will face opposition from the world: *'you are insulted because of the name of Christ'* (4v14), and we will face opposition from the devil: *'Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.'* (5v8). This is the reality of living life as a Christian in the world.

The natural response is to pull back and retreat as a means of survival. But rather than just survive we are called to live holy lives in the world offering the hope that Christ alone can bring. To help us understand this Peter refers to three connecting themes which he refers to throughout his letter – suffering, hope and mission.

Suffering.

Suffering should not surprise us, but the fact is when we do suffer we treat it as something that is not meant to be. Some people even teach that it is God's will not to suffer, which is a different message to Peter: *'Dear friends do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.'* (4v12) This is the normal experience of the Christian life. Rather than avoid suffering we should expect to suffer. Instead of something negative it is a positive sign of our faith. *'..rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...If you are insulted because of the name of Christ you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.'* (4v13-14) Suffering 'insult' 'accusation' or 'abuse' from the world reassures us that we are united to Christ and live for Christ, it is the mark of genuine faith. *'So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.'* (5v19)

The reality of suffering is brought home to us, *'we suffer according to God's will'*. In other words suffering does not happen outside of God, rather God is at work in our suffering and through our suffering. Timmis and Chester comment: *'If we remove God from suffering, we are left with cruel, cold, impersonal suffering. But if I can recognise that my suffering is in some way coming from God himself, then my grief, though real and painful, is not relentless or futile.'* The fact that God is in control of our suffering means that it is not wasted. *'These (trials) have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, honour and glory...'* (1v7) God uses our suffering to grow us and mature us so that we will have assurance of the hope that is to come. Suffering can't be avoided, so we are to embrace it as a work of God in our lives.

Hope.

Suffering naturally leads us to Hope. Reading through Peter's letter we can see how often he connects suffering with our eternal hope. *'In his great mercy he has given us new birth...into an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade kept in heaven for you...In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.'* (1v3,6) *'But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.'* (4v13) *'And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.'* (5v10)

Suffering causes us to look ahead to what is to come. Yes we are suffering now but only for a little while. One day this suffering will be replaced with an eternal glory, which is kept in heaven for us. While we suffer all kinds of trials today the time is coming when we will receive *'the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls.'* (1v9). It is the reality of this hope that enables us to face and endure suffering as Tertullian (c. 160-250 AD) said: 'The leg does not feel the chain if the mind is in heaven.'

The sure expectation of glory means we can continue to do good despite the suffering. Hope motivates us, it encourages us and keeps us focused on the task of mission.

Mission.

Hope always motivates us towards mission. Peter encourages us *'...set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed....just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy because I am holy.'* (1v13,15)

Our hope is eternity. When Jesus Christ is revealed eternity is what we will receive. In view of this hope we are to live holy lives in the world. Holy means to be 'set apart' to live 'distinctly' from the culture around us. We are to behave as children of God living under his rule. In other words it is a call to mission.

This distinct behaviour, however, will cause suffering. *'..if you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear his name.'* (4v15-16) While our missional lives will bring suffering to us, it will also bring hope to others. We live our lives representing Christ, we bear his name, and that brings the hope of Christ to the community in which we live and work. Most people live without any hope but we have a 'living hope' that transforms our lives today and guarantees our eternal destiny. Mission is all about living and declaring the hope that is ours.

Suffering, Hope and Mission are three connecting themes that run through the letter and together they give us meaning and purpose to our lives today. Christians will always suffer where ever we are and where ever we live. Rather than avoid suffering we expect suffering. Suffering however causes us to see our great hope. Suffering will not go on forever, we are assured that a day is coming when we will receive our eternal inheritance. Because we have such a certain hope it motivates us to mission. Hopes helps us see what is to come and therefore what we have to give to a world that is hopeless. Keeping these themes in mind will enable ordinary people like us to live God's way everyday. It will enable us to offer hope at the margins.

Question:

As we face suffering together we offer hope to the world. How well we do that will depend on how well we are applying the gospel to our lives. Look through the following questions and identify those statements that are clearly true of our community and those that are

clearly untrue.

A. God: Are you God-centred?

1. People often extol the goodness and greatness of God in normal conversation.
2. Our corporate worship stirs people's affections for God (their love, fear, hope, confidence, desire).
3. Prayer is a regular part of our life together.
4. People pray together outside meetings as and when issues arise.
5. When we pray as a community, most people contribute.
6. When we pray as a community, it is sometimes difficult because people readily contribute.
7. Our prayer requests focus on God and his glory rather than on us and our comfort.
8. We are trusting in God's sovereignty rather than trying to do his work of conversion or worrying about 'results'.

B. Love: Are you other-centred?

1. People often see one another between scheduled meetings.
2. Most people eat with other members of the community at least twice a week.
3. People often help one another in practical ways like doing chores for one another.
4. People feel a sense of responsibility for one another.
5. People use the language of 'we' rather than 'you' ('We should ...' rather than 'You should ...').
6. People are generous with their time, money, homes and possessions.
7. People are willing to discuss their time and money.
8. People make decisions with regard to the community and in consultation with the community.

C. The Bible: Are you word-centred?

1. There is a hunger for God's word and an excitement when it is taught.
2. People often talk about how the Holy Spirit is speaking to them through his word.
3. The word of God is often discussed outside scheduled Bible studies.
4. People meet up to read the Bible together.
5. There is evidence that the word is changing individual lives.
6. There is evidence that the word is changing the life of the community as a whole.
7. People speak the truth in love when others face pastoral issues.

8. People look to the truth about God rather than blaming their circumstances?

D. Grace: Are you grace-centred?

1. People are open about their sin and struggles rather than hiding or pretending.
2. Conflict is open rather than suppressed and reconciliation is proactively pursued.
3. People repent of sinful attitudes like anxiety, pride, complaining, fear of others, self-justification, bitterness, anger and selfishness.
4. People repent of good works done for self-righteous motives.
5. People are not afraid to make mistakes.
6. People feel able to relax and enjoy leisure activities.
7. Broken people are attracted to our community.
8. We constantly return to the cross in our conversation, prayers and praise.

E. Mission: Are you mission-centred?

1. Unbelievers are involved in the life of our community.
2. We often have opportunities to talk about Jesus.
3. We are flexible and take risks for the sake of the gospel.
4. We are crossing cultural boundaries.
5. We are contributing to neighbourhood and city renewal.
6. We value involvement in work, business, art, culture, public service and government.
7. We have a vision to start a new gospel community or congregation.
8. We are actively and generously involved in mission around the world.

Response.

Pray through together thanking God for the areas we see the gospel taking effect, ask God to change the areas where we are not.