Easter 4 **Mark the Evangelist**
11/5/2014

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

By his wounds, we are healed

Our daily news bulletins, for the most part, are filled with stories of what people are doing to people, and most of it not good. Perhaps most ghastly in the last few weeks has been the abduction of two hundred or so young girls in Nigeria, followed this week by the indiscriminate killing of perhaps 300 more people by the same Islamist movement. A little closer to home is the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, out of which are coming stories which we wish we could not find so believable as we actually do.

It is our familiarity with such things which causes us to wonder whether a passage like the one we've heard from Peter this morning is just too dangerous. "Slaves", Peter writes, "accept the authority of your masters with all deference", with similar advice being given to wives in relation to the authority of their husbands in the next section (3.1-6, cf.v7). The danger has to do with the way in which this kind of exhortation can seem to be a blessing on the prevailing order, the absence of a challenge to an abuse of power which might be in place between masters and slaves, husbands and wives, or any other relationship where there might be a socially sanctioned difference of authority and power. Contrary to our modern sensitivities there is no challenge here to the institution of slavery or, in the next section, to the patriarchal ordering of society.

We must acknowledge the danger in texts like these, before setting the concerns to one side for the sake of hearing what the text is actually proposing, and why. For the scriptures do not thoughtlessly sanction abusive or oppressive relationships or structures. There is a clear understanding that these are bad, and that other types of relationships are better.[1] How a society ought to be ordered is summed up in the general ethical principle of "love your neighbour as you love yourself", a word which is spoken as much to masters as to slaves, to husbands as to wives, and so on. It is also noticed by the scriptures, however, that this is not the way things generally run – or not often enough – and so there enters the need for something else to be said. To our modern minds the "something else" which is required is often a matter of revolution. By this is meant a more or less violent over-turning of one particular moral order, one balance of power, for another thought to be more just. *Perhaps* sometimes this is necessary. Yet revolution is not Peter's proposal.

The situation into which Peter writes is not a "general" one, and so his ethical direction is not merely theoretical. It is worth noting that he actually spends so much time addressing household slaves – scarcely a group whose concerns would seem worthy of being addressed. This suggests that a considerable number of those he was writing to were slaves, and that he was attempting to address a real concern they had about their conditions and relationships to their masters. But, in addition to these people being

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[1] There is also present in Peter's reflections the common sense understanding that suffering for being stupid or wrong is different from what we might like to call "innocent" suffering.

slaves, they are also Christians, and it is on this dimension of their self-understanding that Peter keeps his focus.

At the heart of his address is an account of the saving work of Christ, and the part which suffering played in that work. Again we find ourselves in uncomfortable territory. The suggestion is now that not only should suffering be endured but that it somehow brings salvation or reward. This seems actually to justify suffering by justifying the person who inflicts the suffering as doing the very work of God.

Now, sometimes people *do* speak of a kind of reward which has come to them through a period of suffering – a learning, or some kind of deeper insight or comprehension – but this is not what Peter is speaking of here. For the point is not that Christ's suffering earns him favour before God and that we should expect the same. Peter says instead that Christ's suffering earns *us* favour before God:

> "…He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, *we* might live for righteousness; by *his* wounds *you* have been healed" (v.24).

We might not like this much better, but we might at least see that it is a very different thing from the abusive suggestion that suffering is good for us, especially when we are told this by the person who is tormenting us. As we have noted often enough before and must continue to note if we are to read the Scriptures with understanding: where we place the emphasis in reading these texts is critical. In our objections to the idea that suffering is good for us, the emphasis will fall differently from how I've just read it, now being:

> by his *wounds* you have been *healed*" (v.24).

This emphasis is what makes us uncomfortable – the implication that the wounding is somehow *necessary*. But for Peter the weight falls on the pronouns: *he* suffered, *you* have been healed. In this way it is not the case that the wounds are necessary, only that they actually happen to occur, that they are given. What Peter draws on is not an atonement theory in which Jesus *must* suffer, but only the fact that he did suffer. And so there is no particular *mechanism* of the relationship between the suffering of Jesus and the healing; there is no explanation of *how* the suffering of Jesus works this way. A mechanical connection between the suffering of Jesus and our healing would imply necessity of suffering, and suggest that suffering might be a valid strategy to a desired outcome. This understanding would fail the test of justice – the justice of God, in particular.

The only clue as to how this might "work", if we can call it *working*, is the link which Peter draws between what Jesus has done and what we are to do, and this link appears through Peter's description of the way of Jesus as an "example" left for us. But the suggestion is not that Jesus proved himself before God by suffering, so that we should too, as if we are somehow more righteous if we suffer. It is, rather, that the suffering of Jesus, which is caused *by* his persecutors becomes a suffering *for* those same persecutors. For it is not simply, as we say weekly when gathered around the table, that the body of Jesus is broken "for" us; that this body is also broken *by* us with a cross is part of this mystery. The "example" is the modelling of how this God *uses* suffering: such suffering as the slaves might endure is also to be understood as being not on their own behalf, but *on behalf of the hard masters themselves*. To put it most bluntly: the slaves, if they must suffer (and this is a *given*), suffer for the masters who abuse them, and not for any credit of virtue for themselves. Such suffering is virtuous but accruing virtue is not the point; the point is testimony in action as well as in word. If there is an

offence to be taken in relation to Peter's teaching on submitting to suffering, it is in this: that my suffering could make a difference for someone else – in particular, for the one who causes it. The basis for this extraordinary possibility is that *Jesus'* suffering could make this kind of difference *for us*.[2]

It is very important to see just how and where this claim is made. Again, there is nothing explicit as to how this works, as what the mechanism is. In the end, it works because God wills that this be so. This is neither a general theory about suffering which somehow justifies the abuse of power, nor a word said about every human experience of pain. Peter's very specific concern is how to live as light in a world of darkness, how to testify to the peace of Christ in a world which knows no true peace, a world in which we cannot escape un-peace. None of this is to suggest that suffering itself is justified. None of this is to suggest that there is no place for complaint on our own part or advocacy on the part of others. None of it is to suggest that escape from abusive relationships, if possible, is justified. All Peter draws on here is how he believes that *Jesus himself* has lived peaceably in a violent world: "when he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten". But it is not simply the pattern Jesus lays down which matters here; it is what God does with this peaceable life: the healing of the persecutor.

If there is a leap of faith to be made in entering into Christian belief, it is not the banal leap of simply coming to believe that "there is a God". The true leap is the accepting of the way of being which implies that particular god. Peter declares: if you believe that the death of Jesus saves you, then *this* is the logical way that you yourselves should be in the world. If there is danger in what Peter proposes here, it is because the world can be a very dangerous place. Of this the cross is the sign, and the response.

If we are truly re-made by a dynamic in which our very sin before God is made a means of our cleansing from sin – another dangerous way of putting it (cf. Romans 6.1f) – then this dynamic becomes part of how we ourselves are to be in a world which is still largely marked by sin. Without, then, at all justifying suffering and the abuse of power which brings it, the question is simply, can God make of the suffering we willingly endure and, *just as importantly*, the suffering we inflict, an unexpected, unforseen, resurrecting of what is dead in sin into the healed existence we so desperately need but cannot effect for ourselves?

For Christ's sake – if Christ has anything to do with our salvation – and for our own, we cannot but hope, cannot but believe, that indeed God can do this, and so we cannot but begin to re-order our lives accordingly in *and for* this broken world: advocating for justice, working to relieve suffering, fully expecting that a God who can raise the dead can make good of suffering for the oppressed and for their oppressors.

By the grace of God and the power of his infilling Spirit may we find that we *can* so hope, and live, for the healing of all who suffer and all who cause suffering, to God's greater glory.

Amen.

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[2] Over recent weeks we have seen this in the RCL readings from Peter's sermon to "the house of Israel": this Jesus "whom *you* crucified" has become the means of salvation for those so addressed.