

## **1 Peter 4, 12-14, 5, 6-11**

### **Casting Your Cares**

Thursday was Ascension Day, which for many here was a holiday and it is traditional this Sunday to remember the Ascension of Christ, some 40 days after his resurrection and about 10 days before the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But, as I read through the readings set for today, I was not struck by the ascension story but rather one of the other readings set for today, the letter of Peter and it didn't remind me of a significant historical event in Christian life, but of an experience I had a couple of weeks ago.

Two weeks ago, Jenny and I went up to Deggendorf to deliver a buggy to Jane, a young mother of three young children, living in an early stage of her journey to enter Germany as an Asylum Seeker in a hostel. While we were with her, she discussed her life there and commented on the reaction she had received from the local church when she tried to attend a service. They treated her as an outsider and did not welcome her into their midst. Even at the point of the service when they shared the peace, they ignored her attempts to pass the peace and chose to pass on the peace to their own kind, people who were the same as them, people they could easily relate to. Not some young black asylum seeker they did not know, and clearly had no intention of getting to know. A church full of Christians failed to welcome a young sister in need of support and encouragement.

So, why the letter of Peter? Well, because in this part of his letter Peter is talking about Suffering for being a Christian. I realised as I read it that was

a message to me, and hopefully for all of us to ponder on. Especially, perhaps, in the situation that many people find themselves in as strangers in a different society. It is also, I suspect, a message of some form of encouragement to most of us, who cannot avoid suffering whilst trying to follow Jesus closely and allowing him to govern our lives.

Peter, the disciple, some years after Christ's Ascension, is writing to the churches in the east. We are perhaps more used to Paul's letters, but Peter also wrote, and this letter is written particularly to churches which were located in the region we now know as Turkey. These churches had been formed by Peter from Gentiles, people who had never been Jews. This was unlike Paul, who tended to build churches by converting Jews to Christianity as a progression of their faith. Peter had moved around Gentile populations and worked to convert people who had no tradition of the Jewish Faith and who did not initially understand the context of the society into which Christ had been born. A society very different from theirs.

Peter was writing this letter as he had learned that many of these churches were under persecution. The rest of the population in the towns had no understanding of the life and faith that these churches had and so they tried to put these young Christian communities under pressure and persecution. These Christians were people now different from the locals and they did not now seem to fit in, so the established community decided to deal with the perceived problem; either fit in with our society or pay the price.

In his letter, Peter gives us an image of the devil, an image of everything and everybody that tries to persecute the church and turns people away from Christ. Whatever we may believe is a 'devil' character, the image given by Peter shows how Christians can be attacked and can be separated from the love of Jesus.

Peter gives us a wonderful image of the devil as a roaring lion, devouring the stray sheep that have wandered away from the rest of the flock and from the shepherd. This graphically illustrates dangers of succumbing to temptation, or exposing ourselves to temptation.

Why does Peter choose a lion? I would suggest several reasons.

The lion is known to us as the King of the animals. It is seen at the top of the pecking order. It is not one of the 'other rans' who fit in to one part or another within the 'community' of the animals. It is not like Hyena, which tends to clear up the carcass of an animal that has been killed by something else. The lion does the killing.

The lion kills almost all animals, no matter what size. Of course it kills antelopes and small game, but they also been known to attack animals as large as elephants, able to work together to bring down such large animals. Size does not worry a lion.

The lion is also smart. It is very clever in the way it attacks its prey. If there is a herd of animals the lion identifies either the weak, or the one that has become separated from the herd. This is easy prey. If the prey is weak or has been separated, then it will not get much support from the

rest of the herd. The herd will tend to look after itself and work to get away from danger. The lion will make an easy kill.

The image clearly relates to the life the early church had in the east, without a great amount of support and with little depth of understanding or theology. These tended to be isolated churches with the next young Christian Community some distance away and very poor links of communication. As Gentiles, they had little or no knowledge of the legacy of the Jewish Faith and so they lived their Christian life on a simple understanding of Christ's life, death and resurrection. These young churches could often have disagreements and splinter groups formed as they tried to tackle their true understanding of what Christian Life was all about and what their theology and ethics should be.

The church in which we live is now thousands of years old and has a depth of tradition and understanding of history. The land we live in has been classed as Christian for centuries and has witnessed some of the greatest reforms in Christian History.

But, I would remind you of the story of Jane. Jane experienced a church where she was excluded, because she was different. She was in danger of becoming separated, not because she was weak, but because she was seen by some as different and so a challenge to the understanding and perhaps comfort of the local congregation. This tells us a great deal about that church community, which appears to be very insular and traditional; probably looking after their own comfort and not allowing any challenges to their steady, undemanding life. Totally unaware of the effect of their behaviour and the fact that they are exposing fellow Christians to danger by their lack of Christian love and welcome.

If we look at that church, we could in some ways see the problems described by Peter. A church set in its ways and serving only the local society. A church that is not aware of the wider community or the wider church. A church that can easily isolate people and fail to make sure that 'All are welcome' –as we sang at the beginning of the service.

It is so difficult at times to show that *All Are Welcome* and that all are of equal value in the church because they are equal in the eyes of God. We must all be very careful that we do not exclude people. It is always difficult to relate to those who are not the same as us. Here, in Peace Church, we do have a reputation and a tradition of accepting strangers into our midst, but we must be careful not to become complacent. We must be careful of our attitudes and our comfort as they can often allow separation and weakness and then attack.

This past week in the Church of Scotland, my home church, a great debate has raged over the acceptance of practicing homosexuals into the ministry. It has made me think about who we include within our church. Not only people who are homosexual, but children, older people, people with disabilities, women, men and most important of all, people who are not like me! Because there are times, when in theory we can say "all people should be included", our actions, our attitudes, our words or the way we say them, our look of disdain can make some people feel excluded, alienated, and unwanted. And that happens in churches all over the place and even in ours from time to time.

Do we smile at people we don't really understand?

Do we say "Hello!" to someone we don't know?

Do we moan when there is something we don't like even when another finds it nourishing?

Do we enjoy the company of the small group we are part of but stop short of extending that friendliness to others?

Do we like to remind people that we are a more important member of the church than they?

Do we complain about the way someone does something, and yet never offer to do it ourselves?

Do we think our view is the only view worth listening to?

Do we truly believe that Christ calls each and everyone, no matter what our gifts or our weaknesses, because God's compassion is for all and the Church is for all?

So what is the answer?

Peter suggests to us, when we have these difficulties, when we are unsure of who should be included and whether we ourselves might be too different, or weakened, that we should not worry about the issues ourselves, but rather, we should **Cast our Cares on God**. We should place the concern on God and look for his lead.

Casting is an active verb – it takes effort. In casting we are recognising our personal relationship with God and we are accepting God's answer and direction and we are not relying on our own. God does not ask us to deal with our persecutions and issues all by ourselves. He does not suggest

that we should worry on our own trying to solve them, but we should pray and meditate and discuss with our fellow Christians to find a solution.

If we actively cast our cares on God and we listen to his response, we should not end up in the same situation as that Church in Deggendorf and fail to welcome all, especially the stranger, into our community. Perhaps even more so, we will not leave vulnerable Christians alone and isolated easy prey for the enemy to take. We will actively support all groups, be they like us or be they completely different.

If we cast our care on God, we must place that church in his hands and ask that he helps them become more welcoming and open to strangers.

Jane is still surviving in Deggendorf and praises God daily for the blessings she receives, although life for her is very tough. In my opinion, she has learned to Cast her Cares on God and actively seeks his support and guidance. We should remember this and listen to the words of Peter as he, perhaps remembering his denial of Christ, encourages us to use our self control by being true to Christ, by being alert to the guarantee of attack and by Casting our Cares on the one true God, who sent his Son as a stranger to save the world. We should continue to make sure that 'All are welcome in this place' and that we do not exclude anyone who will then feel isolated and weakened.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, whelp us to cast our care on you  
Help us to know that we cannot fight all battles on our own  
But that we depend on our relationship with you and each other.  
We pray that all Christian communities will be inclusive and that all  
strangers are welcome,  
So that we can declare  
All are welcome in this place.

Amen