

THE HOPE WE HAVE AS BAPTISED CHILDREN OF GOD

Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter, 2017

1 Peter 3:13-22

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Peter 3:13-22: ¹³ **Who is the one who will harm you if you are eager to do good?** ¹⁴ **However, even if you were to suffer because of what is right, you would be blessed. Do not be afraid of what they are afraid of, and do not let yourselves be intimidated!** ¹⁵ **Rather, in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy! Always be ready to make a defence to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect!** ¹⁶ **Keep a good conscience, so that those who make fun of your good life in Christ may be ashamed of their slander!** ¹⁷ **It is better to suffer, if it is God's will, for doing right than for doing wrong.**

¹⁸ **For Christ also suffered once for sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the human nature, but made alive by the Spirit,** ¹⁹ **through whom He also went and preached to the spirits in prison,** ²⁰ **who were disobedient long ago, when God waited patiently, in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared. In it only a few people, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.** ²¹ **That also prefigured baptism, which now saves you, not by washing dirt from the body, but by guaranteeing a good conscience before God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** ²² **He has gone to heaven and is at the right hand of God, after angels, rulers, and powers have been made subordinate to Him.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There can be no doubt we are living in perilous times. The signs of the end of the world prophesied by Christ in Matthew 24 are all around us: "*many will be deceived... wars and rumours of wars... nations against nations... kingdoms against kingdoms... famines and earthquakes.*" And the Apostle Paul also writes to Timothy saying that in later times, even in the church there will be some who will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.¹ Satan continues to attack the church from within. But even from outside the church there is also trouble. There is

¹ 1 Timothy 4:1

the rise of Islam and atheism. The sheer hatred boldly shown to Christians by the world can knock the wind out of our sails, and it can be tough being a Christian in an increasingly un-Christian world. As we shudder to think at how bad things will get, or what severe persecution is just around the corner for any of us, yet we find comfort knowing that the gates of hell will never overpower Christ and His Church.² That is where we find our comfort. We look to Jesus, the *Author and Perfector of our faith*, (Hebrews 12:2), for it is in Him alone that we have our hope.

Having our hope in Jesus, we must therefore always be ready to speak out as Christians. That's the situation that St. Peter addresses in our text for today. There Peter encourages the Christians hearing his letter, and he encourages us, to **“always be ready to make a defence to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that you have.”** And he does this, not by hammering them over the head, but **with gentleness and respect**, by reminding them of who they are in Christ.

In writing these words, Peter has in mind Christians who are being pressured and persecuted for their Christian faith. They may be brought in for questioning by the government officials because they belong to this weird little religion called Christianity, which doesn't really fit in with the rest of the culture. This 'Jesus religion' makes people feel uncomfortable. They don't understand it. They don't like it. And so, the Christians may take a little heat for being Christians. They will be under scrutiny. People will have their eye on them. They'll be watching their conduct. If the Christians mess up, if they slip up, that will give people a reason to dismiss their religion, or even to justify persecuting them.

So, Peter tells Christians living in this sort of a situation to watch their conduct and to be ready to speak up for the Christian faith. He writes:¹³ **Who is the one who will harm you if you are eager to do good?** ¹⁴ **However, even if you were to suffer because of what is right, you would be blessed. Do not be afraid of what they are afraid of, and do not let yourselves be intimidated!** ¹⁵ **Rather, in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy! Always be ready to make a defence to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect!** ¹⁶ **Keep a good conscience, so that those who make fun of your good life in Christ may be ashamed of their slander!** ¹⁷ **It is better to suffer, if it is God's will, for doing right than for doing wrong.**

While it is true that we here in Australia are not facing violent persecution or imprisonment for our faith - at least not yet - to some extent things have not changed

² Matthew 16:18

from Peter's day to ours. People in our culture look upon Christians as being a little weird or strange. The world does not understand our religion. They don't get it. They don't like it. We make them feel uncomfortable. We remind them that there is a God in the heavens who is looking down on all of us and seeing how we're doing, and that one day they too, like us, will have to stand before the Judge and give an account of themselves to God.³ People want to get out from under that. Their conscience nags at them. They'd rather not think about things like God and guilt, sin and death and what happens after that. And we Christians remind them of all that uncomfortable reality.

Therefore, we are not surprised when the people of this world look for opportunities to make fun of us, or focus on our flaws and weaknesses, in order to dismiss our faith. *"Those Christians who gather on a Sunday, they're just a bunch of phonies and hypocrites. Who needs their stupid religion? Who needs their church?"* That's the attitude of the world around us.

What Peter is saying is basically: Don't give them ammunition. Don't give the world extra reasons to dismiss Christianity by doing wrong and bringing shame to the name of Christ. It's going to be bad enough anyway for Christians living in a hostile world. Don't make things worse by your bad behaviour.

And this is a reminder for us, too. How are we living out there in the world? Is our behaviour bringing praise or disgrace to the name of Christ? Are we living any differently from the people of the world? We should be. The Holy Spirit makes a difference in the way we live. Love and good works are the fruit of a living faith. But if we behave in a way that people say, *"If that's how a Christian lives, if that's how the people of that church act, then I don't want any part of it"* - in those cases, we are giving a negative witness to our Lord and His church. If so, then we need to repent of our sin and return to the Lord for His forgiveness and His help to do better.

But even when we are conducting ourselves in a way that befits the Christian life, the people of this world will still look at us a little sceptically. So, are we ready to speak up if someone were to ask about the hope we have as Christians? The answer ought to be yes, we are ready. Why? Because of one significant word: **Baptism.** We have been baptised. We are saved, and thus we are ready to speak.

We have been baptised, joined to Jesus, connected to Christ, in Holy Baptism. Our life is all bound up with His. And this is good. In fact, this is great! This is everything, this being connected to Jesus, for without Him we have no hope, we have no future.

³ Romans 14:12

Only death and the grave and eternal separation from God would lie in front of us. We would be the walking dead right now apart from Christ. But with Him we have everything going for us, all the things that really matters: peace with God, forgiveness for our sins, the Holy Spirit working in our life, the sure hope of everlasting life to come. All this and more is what we received when we were baptised into Christ.

And so, we have been saved. Just before He ascended into heaven, Jesus said, “*He who believes and is baptised will be saved,*” (Mark 16:16). Or, as Peter puts it in our text today: “**baptism... now saves you.**” Yes, here and elsewhere, the Bible teaches the saving power of Holy Baptism. The main thing in baptism is what God is doing. God acts in and through baptism. That’s why we call it a sacrament. God is working, working to save us from our sins and to unite us with Christ and to bring us to life, new and eternal life.

Peter compares the saving waters of baptism to the flood of Noah’s time. Peter speaks of the **ark... being prepared. In it only a few people, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.** The very waters that were destroying the earth were in a way saving Noah and his family, since they buoyed up his great ark and were spared the terrible convulsions that were taking place on the surface of the earth. Since the great aquifers were all blasting to the surface at once and tearing up the land, it was actually much safer to be in a boat riding on top of all that water. Peter says that those “saving” flood waters **prefigured baptism, which now saves you.** The floodwaters actually preserved Noah and were not just symbolic. Baptism does not merely signify our salvation, but actually gives it by connecting us with the death and resurrection of Christ. Its value is **not by washing dirt from the body, but by guaranteeing a good conscience before God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** All our sins have been washed away. We now stand clean before God, with a clear conscience, and it’s all because of what Christ our Saviour has done for us.

So, it always comes back to Jesus. Notice how Peter grounds everything in Christ: “¹⁸ **For Christ also suffered once for sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.**” That’s what Jesus did when He died on the cross for us. Jesus was perfectly righteous, with no sin of His own, and yet He suffered death for us, in order to bring us to God, righteous by way of forgiveness. That’s what Jesus did for us by His atoning death on the cross.

And then what, what did Jesus do next? Peter continues: “¹⁹ **through whom He also went and preached to the spirits in prison,** ²⁰ **who were disobedient long ago, when God waited patiently.**” This is talking about Christ’s descent into hell. This descent was not part of Christ’s suffering - He did indeed experience the horror and

desolation of hell, but that happened on the cross. When Jesus cried out, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” He was suffering true hell, for His Father had turned His back on His Son. But after Jesus died, and before His resurrection, at some point during that time, Jesus descended into hell to proclaim His victory over hell and the devil. Yes, Christ’s victory and authority extends over death and Hades, so that the devil has no more power over us. More good news!

And then there is the resurrection itself. The victory has been made known and seen by witnesses and now is proclaimed for all to hear! “**The resurrection of Jesus Christ,**” Peter writes, who “**has gone to heaven and is at the right hand of God, after angels, rulers, and powers have been made subordinate to Him.**” Notice how Peter here basically has taken us through what would become the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed. For in this text Peter has hit on all these points: that Jesus Christ our Lord “*was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*”

And so this, dear friends, this is how we have the hope we do. It’s all centred in Christ and in what He has done for us and what He has in store for us. This is the Christian faith. This is the Christian hope. This is what we have been baptised into. This is how we are saved.

This, then, is why and how we are ready to speak. Just tell the people about Jesus. If you are put on the spot, and cannot think of anything to say, run through the Apostles’ Creed. It’s all there: Who God is, and who He is for us. The heavenly Father, who created us and cares for us. God the Son, Jesus Christ, the One who died and rose for us, to bring us to God and to give us eternal life. The Holy Spirit, who quickens our faith in Christ and keeps us close to Him and draws us into the life of the church.

Dear friends, always be ready to speak up about your Saviour and the Christian faith and hope. We have been baptised. Eternal life awaits! We have been saved! We live in the hope that one day we shall be called to be with Him forevermore. It is a hope we are not ashamed of, and it is a hope that we proclaim to others. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER.

Lord, our God, You alone know the plans that You have for us and our world, but we rejoice and worship You because we know that they are loving plans. In Your goodness, You spread life, love, beauty, and joy throughout Your creation. In Your

grace, You lighten the misery of our sinful lives, and bless us with pardon and peace. If it is your will that we must pass through troubles, enable us to turn them into opportunities, for Your glory.

We give You our warmest thanks for the precious gift of Your Son, Jesus, whom You have sent that we may have life in all its fullness. We praise You that He has humbly come into our world, has taken on Himself our sins, and has carried them to death on the cross. We glorify Your name for our release from the power of death, and for our sure hope of heaven through His resurrection.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the privilege of being Your spiritual priests, as we pray in Jesus' name. We thank You for Your promise to hear all our prayers. Keep us close to Jesus each day in faith and love, gladly hearing His Word and following Him, wherever He leads us. Send Your Word out into the whole world, that it may achieve what You have planned for it. Let us as Your representatives, whom You have called out of darkness, proclaim Your light in this dark world. Give us the courage also to speak Your word of judgment when people reject Christ, the Cornerstone.

Bless Your Church on every continent. Renew Your people to be a loving fellowship of believers, a family of trust and prayer, and people who are ready to serve the needy in love.

Lead all the nations of the earth along the ways of justice, righteousness, and peace. Look with special favour on our country. Give to our Prime Minister, to the Premiers of each State, to our cabinets and parliaments, to our police and to our courts, such qualities of heart and mind that they may carry out their duties earnestly, wisely, and fairly. Protect us from all enemies, both within and without our country. Remove all strife from us. Inspire obedience to all law and order. Fill all citizens with love of holiness and moral purity. Grant that all who work in industry may find joy in their work and receive proper rewards for their efforts. Give satisfaction to those who work in the professions, as they work for the good of all. Give those who farm the soil favourable weather. Bless their work of feeding the world.

Bless all our loved ones, and make our homes places of peace. We remember especially the sick, the troubled, and the bereaved. In Jesus' name free them from the burdens of their pain and sadness.

Keep us standing strong and steady in faith. Since serving You is never useless, give us the opportunity to be busy in Your work. In Jesus' saving name we offer You these prayers. Amen.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 17:16-31

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was irritated in him when he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ Therefore he had discussions in the synagogue with the Jews and with the God-fearing Greeks, and in the marketplace every day with people who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also had conversations with him, but some were asking, “What might this scrap-collector want to say?” Others were saying, “He seems to be one who proclaims foreign divinities,” because he was telling the Good News about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ They took an interest in him, brought him to the Areopagus, and asked, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you are introducing some astonishingly strange things into our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.”

²¹ All the Athenians and the foreigners who were living there spent their time doing nothing but either saying or listening to something quite new.

²² Paul stood in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. ²³ For, as I walked around and carefully observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with

this inscription: ‘To an unknown god.’ Therefore I am telling you about what you are worshipping, although you do not know about it. ²⁴ God, who made the world and everything in it, is the Lord of heaven and earth. He does not live in temples made by human hands, ²⁵ and human hands do not serve Him as if He needed anything. He Himself gives everyone life, breath, and everything else. ²⁶ From one man He has made every nation of mankind to live all over the earth. He has set the times allotted to them and the boundaries inside which they should live, ²⁷ that they may seek God and perhaps feel their way to Him and find Him, although He is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For in Him we live, move, and exist; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For, we also are His offspring.’ ²⁹ Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the Divine Being is like gold, silver, or stone, like an image that the art and the imagination of a human being have formed. ³⁰ Although in past times God overlooked such ignorance, He now commands people everywhere that they should all repent, ³¹ because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world justly, by a Man whom He has appointed. He has provided everyone reason to believe this by raising Him from the dead.”

1 Peter 3:13-22

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powers have been made subordinate to Him.

John 14:15-21

¹⁵ "If you love Me, you will keep My Commandments. ¹⁶ I shall also ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ He is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see or know Him. You know Him, because He remains with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I shall not leave you as orphans. I am coming back to you.

¹⁹ "Only a little while longer and the world will not see Me any more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in My Father, that you are in Me, and that I am in you.

²¹ "The person who has My Commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me. The person who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I shall love him and show Myself to him."