

OUR SUFFERING FOR CHRIST LINKS US CLOSELY WITH CHRIST

Sermon for the 7th Sunday of Easter, 2017

1 Peter 4:12-19

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 4:12-19, that first part of our Second Reading from before, that reminds us of suffering as Christians: ¹² **Dearly loved people, do not be astonished at the fiery ordeal among you, by which you are being tested, as though something strange were happening to you!** ¹³ **However, rejoice in as far as you share in Christ's sufferings, so that you may also rejoice and be very glad when His glory is revealed!** ¹⁴ **If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God is resting on you.** ¹⁵ **Of course, none of you should suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or one who meddles in the affairs of others!** ¹⁶ **However, if anyone suffers as a Christian, he should not be ashamed, but should glorify God for that name!**

¹⁷ **For it is time for the judgment to begin with the household of God. However, if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who refuse to listen to the Good News of God?** ¹⁸ **If it is hard for a righteous person to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and sinful person?** ¹⁹ **Therefore those who are suffering according to the will of God should commit their souls to the faithful Creator, as they continue to do good! ...**

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

Dear friends in Christ,

To appreciate the richness of the Apostle Peter's words today, we must first see it in its setting.

Life was quite difficult for Christians living in Peter's time. They were being severely persecuted all for the name of Jesus. At first, persecution against Christians were done by Jews who saw Christ as a major threat to their religious beliefs and way of life. The same Sanhedrin that had put Jesus to death saw to it that the deacon Stephen became the first martyr.¹ After that murder, the floodgates of hatred and persecution were opened, and most of the Christians were driven from Jerusalem.²

¹ Acts 7

² Acts 8

They took their faith with them, however, and planted new congregations wherever they went. The new centre of the church came to be Antioch in Syria. Another sad blow came when King Herod Agrippa casually had the apostle James beheaded in order to curry favour with his Jewish subjects. Paul frequently encountered bitter Jewish hostility on his missionary journeys, as for example, in Thessalonica, where some Jews started a riot and effectively drove him out of town.³ Paul himself later was placed under Roman arrest in Jerusalem because a mob of Jews was beating him and trying to kill him.⁴

The Roman government at first ignored Christianity, thinking that it was just a weird offshoot of Judaism, which had official permission to exist. By the time Peter was writing his first letter, however, the split between Christianity and Judaism was apparent to all, and Christianity was viewed as a dangerous and subversive movement. The emperor Nero, a violent and immoral man, in July of the year 64 chose to blame the Christians in Rome for a terrible fire that had destroyed part of the city. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, hundreds of Christians were arrested, convicted for anti-social beliefs, covered in the skins of wild animals, and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, coated with pitch, and set on fire, so when darkness fell, they burned like torches in the night. We thank God that it isn't like that today here in our country!

Because of their suffering from being surrounded by heathen people out for blood, Peter wanted to remind the Christians that they had been chosen to be God's children, heirs of an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away.⁵ Through all their suffering, they could find comfort in the knowledge that their salvation was not earned with corruptible things as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, who was foreordained before the foundation of the world and was manifested for them.

To this great love of God, who had chosen them to be His own, they were encouraged to add love for one another, thus finding strength in their united stand for Christ.

In the light of this context, the opening words of our text, "**Dearly loved people,**" takes on a much fuller meaning. The recipients of the Letter should remember that *they are* the children of God, loved by Him with an everlasting love in Christ. They are also

³ Acts 17

⁴ Acts 21

⁵ 1 Peter 1:3-5

loved by Peter and other Christians far removed from them. And they are loved by their fellow members. Not one of them was to think himself alone and unloved.

That applies with equal force today. People are drifting apart. They are often thrown into large crowds but feel themselves all alone. Maybe more than ever, Christians today need to know that they are never alone, they are loved by God and by God's children everywhere.

Of course, this is a matter of faith. The love of God cannot always be seen and felt. Fiery trials and suffering at times seem to rule it out, because sometimes God lets His children suffer abuse. Today, we find more and more laughing at our "narrow views." How many times do we see Christians making a bold stand against such things like homosexuality, abortion, same-sex "marriage", and so on, only to suffer for it. Perhaps you have suffered personally for making a stand against these or other such abominations. You make God's will known, only to be shot down or humiliated by the crowd.

Today, Peter reminds us that in this world, it is perfectly normal if, as Christians, we suffer abuse, ridicule, and hatred. In fact, it is not something unheard of, something foreign to Christianity, but a necessary part of it.¹² **Dearly loved people**, Peter says, **do not be astonished at the fiery ordeal among you, by which you are being tested, as though something strange were happening to you!** Being part of God's family, we are cross-bearers, and the way the world treats us is not something strange at all. Actually, some abuse that Christians suffer can become very severe. Why? Peter says it's **because of the name of Christ**. Jesus expressed the same thought in the Sermon on the Mount when He said: "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of Me!*" (Matt. 5:11). If we are persecuted or punished for wrongdoing, we have no reason to complain, but we must also expect to suffer at times for saying and doing what is right. That was what happened to Jesus, and He warns that we must not expect any better treatment from the unbelieving world.

Yet Peter says that **if (we) are insulted because of the name of Christ, (we) are blessed**. Why are we blessed? **Because the Spirit of glory and of God is resting on (us)**." If we are insulted for Christ's sake and bear the insult, we do so with power from on high. The **Spirit of glory**, that is, the Holy Spirit, is then working in us. Without Him we could show no patience or Christian strength, but under His guidance we are credited with endurance befitting a Christian and have every reason to rejoice that God is working so effectively in and through us. Such rejoicing in the good works we do is not a sign of vanity, but of humble recognition of God's grace and power.

The Apostle Paul says, “*I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me,*” (1 Cor. 15:10). The Holy Spirit working in us is glorified by our works so that even unbelievers have to recognise His power in us though they malign and reject Him when He seeks to work in their hearts.

So, if we are called upon to suffer abuse and ridicule, then our attitude under all trials should not be one of sadness and much complaining, but one of rejoicing. **Rejoice in as far as you share in Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also rejoice and be very glad when His glory is revealed!** Our joy, if called upon to suffer, lies in this: that our suffering for Christ links us closely with Christ. He who made us His own without any merit or worthiness on our part - we were bought with the precious blood of Christ - permits us to share in His suffering, thus showing us how closely and intimately we are related to Him. We are members of His body. We are one with Him through and through so that even unbelievers see this close tie and hate Christ in us.

What joy in the thought that the Christ in us is so evident to the world that it hates us for His name’s sake!⁶ What reason we have to rejoice with the apostles that we are permitted to suffer shame for His name’s sake!⁷ This hatred is directed toward Christ, and we become partakers of it because we are identified with Him in His purpose and work.

Naturally, when speaking of becoming partakers of Christ’s suffering, we must not think of ourselves as helping to earn redemption for the world. The suffering referred to here is not for the sins of mankind, but for confessing the Saviour before men. In this we have an important part to play, and suffering is a natural consequence of it.

But it will not always be so. The time will come when the power of the devil and the world will be broken. When the Saviour appears in glory on the Last Day, even His enemies will have to bow before Him. There won’t be any mocking on Judgment Day, but weeping and gnashing of teeth for those who reject Him.

On that day we Christians will also be glorified. People won’t laugh at us then. They won’t ridicule our foolish preaching. The days of suffering for Christ’s name’s sake will be over. Then joy will be ours. Peter cannot possibly express how much we shall rejoice. He can only say that we shall be **very glad when His glory is revealed, rejoicing with exultation**. Even the joy which is now our own as Christians is described by the apostle as something in which we can **rejoice**.

⁶ John 15:18ff

⁷ Acts 5:40ff

What can be said, then, of the pure and holy joy which will be ours at the revelation of Christ? Here Paul's words come to mind, that "*the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us,*" (Rom. 8:18).

Finally, Peter brings in an obvious conclusion. ¹⁶ **However, if anyone suffers as a Christian, he should not be ashamed, but should glorify God for that name!** If any of us, or any Christian for that matter, who suffers abuse, are being guided by the Holy Spirit and are partakers of the sufferings of Christ, what reason do we have to be ashamed? Rather, let us glorify and praise the Lord who has so highly honoured us!

A final word before we close. Naturally not everything we suffer is brought on by our confession of Christ and the good works that follow. The Lord must often chastise us and chasten us to arouse us from sin and shame. It is, therefore, important that we take a careful stock of our life when suffering comes. Is it a result of good or evil in our life? Are we suffering for Christ's name's sake, or is God correcting us for our own sake, to keep us from falling? Sorry to say, the latter is often the case. We daily sin much and are slow to admit it. So suffering becomes our lot. But even here there is a great difference between our suffering and that of the unbeliever. Our suffering becomes a check against the outbursts of sin in us. The purpose is beneficial. But the suffering of those who do not repent is only the beginning of far greater suffering in eternity.

What need we have, therefore, for the exhortation in the closing verse, to **commit (our) souls to the faithful Creator!** Committing our souls to the Lord is trusting in Him for our every need. Casting our care upon Him, we know He will care for us, and the result will be a life well spent. He will make good use of the talents He has given us and produce in our lives a constant stream of good works. "*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works,*" (Eph. 2:10). Let the world think and do with us as they wish, for we know that committing ourselves to His care, speaking out for the Lord, and trusting in Him, He will help us make it to our heavenly goal – eternal life with Him. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Almighty God, our light and our salvation, we praise You for Your love and pity to all people. But we praise You especially for giving us Your only Son Jesus Christ, who has ascended in triumph to Your right hand and sits at Your right hand with all other authority subordinated to Him. We thank You for crowning Him with glory and

honour because of His obedient life, His innocent suffering, His redeeming death, and His resurrection. You have made Him king over all and Lord of all things for the benefit of the Church. Grant that we too may continue to confess Him as Lord of our hearts and our only Saviour.

Enable us through Your Holy Spirit to understand and know the things that belong to Your eternal kingdom. Comfort and strengthen us by Your heavenly truth. Stir our lives by Your Spirit, so that we may be ready to forgive others, love others as brothers and sisters, and be willing to help others generously and cheerfully. Keep us watchful and prayerful, so that we may not fall into temptation. If need be, give us the willingness to suffer for Jesus' sake. When testing comes, help us through Your Spirit to stand firm and steady, always busy in our work for You.

Renew all who serve in Your Church by Your gracious, powerful Spirit, that Christ may be consistently confessed, His cross uplifted, and His Gospel proclaimed as the only power that saves. Give grace and power to all pastors and missionaries, and warm love to all Your people, so that all may use their varied gifts to Your praise, through Jesus Christ.

Bless all parents, that they may give a good example to their children and encourage them in faith, godly living, daily study of Your Word, and a life of service to You and to all people.

Pour out Your Spirit on our nation, that our people may live in peaceful and pious homes, and may serve You in all godliness and honour. Give Your blessing to all who work with mind or hand, that they may do their tasks honestly and conscientiously, and receive both satisfaction and a proper reward for their service. Give true wisdom to all in government, that they may perform their duties in ways that please You.

Hear the prayers of all in trouble and suffering. In the quiet hours of the night when there is no one to share their burdens of pain, loneliness, and worry, give them Your strength and hope, and assure them of Your love, power, and constant presence.

We give to You, heavenly Father, and your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and to the Spirit of glory and of peace, all the praise for ever and ever. Amen.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:12-26

¹² Then they went back to Jerusalem from what was called "the Mount of Olives," which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

¹³ When they entered, they went to the second-floor room where they were staying. There were Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴

With one mind these all kept praying together, along with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the disciples (the number of persons all together was about a hundred and twenty), and he said, ¹⁶ “Men, brothers, the passage of Scripture that the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David about Judas had to be fulfilled. He served as a guide for the men who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For Judas had been counted as one of us and had received his portion in this ministry. ¹⁸ With the reward that he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field. He fell headlong, and burst open in the middle, and all his intestines poured out. ¹⁹ All those who live in Jerusalem have heard about it; and so that piece of land is called ‘Akel-Dama’ in their language; that is, ‘Field of Blood.’ ²⁰ For Scripture has said in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his home be deserted and let there be no one who lives in it!’ and ‘Let someone else take his position of oversight!’ ²¹ Therefore there must be one of the men who have accompanied us all through the time when the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² one of these men who have been with us, beginning with the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken up from us, to be a witness with us of His resurrection.”

²³ So they proposed two men: Joseph, called “Barsabbas,” who was also

known as “Justus,” and Matthias. ²⁴

Then they prayed, “Lord, You know the hearts of all. Show which of these two You have chosen ²⁵ to take over the position of this ministry and office of apostle, from which Judas has transgressed, to go to his own place!”

²⁶ They cast lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was chosen by vote to be added to the eleven apostles.

1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11

¹² Dearly loved people, do not be astonished at the fiery ordeal among you, by which you are being tested, as though something strange were happening to you! ¹³ However, rejoice in as far as you share in Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also rejoice and be very glad when His glory is revealed! ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God is resting on you. ¹⁵ Of course, none of you should suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or one who meddles in the affairs of others! ¹⁶ However, if anyone suffers as a Christian, he should not be ashamed, but should glorify God for that name!

¹⁷ For it is time for the judgment to begin with the household of God. However, if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who re-fuse to listen to the Good News of God? ¹⁸ If it is hard for a righteous person to be saved, what will become of the

ungodly and sinful person? ¹⁹ Therefore those who are suffering according to the will of God should commit their souls to the faithful Creator, as they continue to do good!

...

^{5,6} Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the right time! ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on Him! For He cares for you.

⁸ Be self-controlled and alert! Your enemy, the Devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Be strong in your faith, and resist him, knowing that your fellow-Christians in the world are undergoing the same kinds of sufferings! ¹⁰ After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you in Christ Jesus to His eternal glory, will Himself make you complete, make you firm, make you strong, and give you a good foundation. ¹¹ To Him be the power for ever! Amen.

John 17:1-11

¹ Jesus spoke these Words, and looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, so that Your Son may glorify You! ² For You have given Him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him. ³ This is eternal life, to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. ⁴ I have glorified You on the

earth by finishing the work that You have given Me to do. ⁵ Now, Father, glorify Me at Your side with the glory that I had with You before the world existed!

⁶ "I have made Your name known to the people whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your Word. ⁷ Now they know that all things that You have given Me come from You, ⁸ because I have given them the Words that You have given Me; and they have received them and learned the truth that I have come from You, and they have believed that You have sent Me. ⁹ I pray for them. I do not pray for the world, but for those whom You have given Me. For they are Yours. ¹⁰ All that are Mine are Yours, and what are Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name that You have given Me, so that they may be one, as We are one!