

## Sermon for Trinity 3 2020

*“Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*  
*1Peter 5.5*

Tomorrow is the feast day of St Peter, Apostle and martyr. Peter is one of the primary characters in the gospels. He has the role of the leader of the disciples, and he is present at every major event in Jesus ministry. Peter is impulsive and energetic. He is the one who promoted people into positions of ministry after the Ascension of Jesus. Peter becomes the leader of the church in its infancy.

In his first letter he is writing to the elders of the church, the bishops if you like, and he is reminding them in what manner they must present themselves as leaders. He is adamant that they should be like shepherds leading their flock. They are not to be violent and crude. Rather they are to be humble. In their humility they are also to fight against the devil, or fight against evil. He teaches that the leaders of the church are to love their flock and to be gentle with them. The leaders of the church must also actively speak against, and act against, all that is evil.

Humility does not mean always being meek and mild. If we think that being a follower of Jesus means that we are to be subject to others, That we are to always be meek and mild, quiet and submissive, then we can remind ourselves of Jesus’ response to the money changers in the temple. Jesus did not play humble with them and let them continue to use the temple as a house of business. He drove them out with a whip. He tipped over the tables. He was furious that the temple was being used to exploit people rather than encourage and heal them. His reaction could well be described as righteous anger. Perhaps humble before God and angry with evil.

When Peter speaks of humility on the one hand and opposing evil on the other it is a portrayal of the vast dimension of our faith. It is as though our faith has instruction that presents as a series of opposites. It has extremes of expectation.

When Peter speaks to the shepherds, the bishops, his first intention is that they concentrate on following Christ. If they follow that example, they will lead the people in their care with compassion and nurture. Peter is pointing out that it is very difficult to teach a faith based on humility, if the teacher is not leading a life of humility. He is going beyond the adage of do as I say, not as I do, and insisting that it become do as I do, so that you may believe that which I say. We could even suggest that the shepherd be constantly aware of that which their own life and priorities might teach. One of my training rectors pointed out to me that in everything I do, and in everything I say, I am teaching. It is a sobering thought.

I comfort myself by looking back to Peter. He denied our Lord three times on the night of the betrayal and arrest. He completely misunderstood the transfiguration and wanted to lock Jesus, Moses and Elijah into time and space. He chopped off the ear of one of the soldiers in the garden, he grudgingly threw his fishing net into the sea to satisfy Jesus that there were no fish to be found.

Jesus then reinstated Peter three times. Peter, son of John, do you love me? Feed my lambs. Lord let us build three tabernacles, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. Jesus replied that he must continue with his ministry. There were many other villages and people that he must visit. When the soldier's ear was severed Jesus healed the man and pointed out that swords were not the answer. When Peter grudgingly threw out the net the catch was enormous.

Our Lord responded to that which we might see as weaknesses with a positive answer. This is why I take comfort when I look at Peter. When I get it wrong, when my pride overtakes my humility, when my teaching lacks integrity, when I become angry for no good reason, Our Lord is watching and hopefully teaching me to behave differently. I pray that Our Lord will bring comfort to the people whose peace I have disturbed.

I also take comfort from Peter because when he did speak out against evil he did so clearly and with appropriate teaching. When Peter became the first bishop of the infant church there was much teaching to be done, and to speak and act against evil was a high priority. I take comfort from this because there have been occasions when I have had need to speak against that which I perceived to be either evil or opposed to the teaching of Our Lord. To speak against evil is invariably a very lonely and isolating experience. Even so, we are called to live in humility and to speak against evil.

Peter, for his part, was eventually crucified for teaching the truth of Our Lord Jesus. He spent his entire ministry as a follower of Our Lord. In everything he did his intention was to reflect the teaching of Jesus. Certainly his humility before Jesus was very evident when the time came for his martyrdom. He insisted that he was unworthy to die as Our Lord had died, so he insisted that he be crucified upside down.

Peter the example of faith before Our Lord encourages us to look always to the presence of Christ and to seek to live by the teaching of that which is recorded in scripture. Yes we are to be humble to each other, we are to be subject to our elders in all things right and legal, and we are to actively speak out against all that is evidently the temptations of the devil. We are to speak out, to act against, racism, prejudice, greed, persecution, bullying at all levels, abuse of power and all that forces our brothers and sisters to be treated unworthy of love and respect.

When we live our lives following the example of Christ, as Peter has done, there will be times when we will be rejected, isolated, and put aside. When this happens we turn to Our Lord for strength, encouragement and direction, knowing that Our Lord will give us the strength, the courage and the wisdom to respond to all circumstances.

No doubt Peter felt alone and isolated when he was crucified. We know that Our Lord felt that way when he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" We too may feel that way from time to time, but we are also confident that God is with us. God is around us and God is within us. God will never forsake us.