

**Date:** 5<sup>th</sup> June 2011

**Sermon:** Rev Dr André Groenewald

**Reading:** 1 Peter 4:12-5:11

Background to the reading

In the Old Testament, and according to Jewish tradition, God's people would suffer greatly just before the time of the end. When the end of time does appear the wicked will be judged. Jewish tradition often emphasized that the righteous experienced their sufferings in this age but that the wicked would experience theirs throughout the age to come.

1 Peter is again in our reading referring to the suffering of the early Christians. We do not know from the text itself to which sufferings he is referring but we can assume that he is talking of the suffering endured and persecution done by the Emperor Nero of the Roman Empire. Nero was renowned for his infidelities and cruelty especially against the Christians. He also supposedly murdered his step brother and mother. In 64 BC a huge fire nearly destroyed the city of Rome and he blamed the Christians for it. He captured many Christians and he burned them alive as torches to provide light for his lavish nightly garden parties.

But he could also just have been referring to the suffering of Christians in general. He could have been just emphasizing the point he made in chapter 1 that through suffering and trials their faith in Jesus Christ is tested and refined just like gold that perishes and is refined by fire. And when they suffer because of their faith they share in the suffering of Christ but also in his glory. They must not be disheartened because the Spirit of God already rests upon them and He will help them.

The nickname "Christian" was originally used only by those hostile to Christianity like Nero who used this description in a hostile way referring to those who follow Jesus. The image of judgment beginning at God's household is an Old Testament one, as well as the expression, "the time has come". Peter proves his case in 4:17 by citing the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint of Proverbs 11:31, which may reflect what had become of the prevailing Jewish conception by Peter's day that the righteous suffered in this life, but the wicked suffered in the world to come.

Peter closes chapter 4 with language that echoes a familiar Jewish prayer. The final benediction of one regularly uttered Jewish prayer included the lines "Our lives are committed to your hand, and our souls are in your care," and some others also uttered similar prayers in the face of possible death which can be found in Psalm 31:5: "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth."

The behaviour of church leaders in the time of crisis could encourage or discourage the flock. The leaders, once known, would be the first targets of search, capture, torture and execution.

Elders, older and wiser men skilled in judging cases, ruled in most Israelite towns in the Old Testament. In the New Testament period, “elders” held a respected place in the synagogues from which the churches took over this form of leadership. Peter ranks himself among them as a fellow elder.

The image of a “shepherd” is that of a concerned guide, and not of a severe ruler like Nero for instance. Charges of illegal gain were often made against moral teachers in the ancient world, and it was necessary for Christians to avoid even the appearance of bad behaviour. The Christian leaders were like certain officials in the Jewish community, responsible for distributing funds for the poor.

Heads of Greek philosophical schools and Jewish schools of law presented their lives as models to their students, but some also exercised strict control.

In ancient texts a “chief shepherd” appears to have been an overseer of a group of other shepherds, although they were usually not well-to-do themselves. “Crowns” were garlands given to victors of athletic contests, benefactors or other heroes, and they were perishable. In this case those who are faithful to Christ would receive an imperishable crown. The image was also used in Judaism.

Respect for parents, elders and, in Judaism, those more knowledgeable in the law was socially essential in antiquity. Some Jewish traditions regarded it as an expression of one’s respect for God. Such respect included deferring to the wisdom of older men and allowing them to speak first. Peter advocates submission to the ruling elders, but he also urges—against Greco-Roman society’s ideals—mutual humility, based on the teaching of the Old Testament according to Prov 3:34.

Following on Proverbs 3:34, 1 Peter urges believers to “humble” themselves before God. In the Old Testament, this idea often meant repenting, sometimes when facing impending judgment, or learning of one’s complete dependence on God. Here the sense includes embracing and accepting the suffering until God provides the way out.

Although the promise of complete relief from persecution is future, the AUTHOR encourages believers to pray and trust God’s love for them in the present. Judaism learned to see God’s love in Israel’s sufferings as disciplines of love, but most pagans, who exchanged sacrifices and vows to get benefactions from the gods, had difficulty with this concept.

He concludes with the word Amen which means “it is certain, sure and valid”.

## Sermon

The text verses for the sermon are: <sup>6</sup> *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.* <sup>7</sup> *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

I can just imagine how much this reading must have meant for those early Christians who were still coming to terms with their new lives of faith, and coming to terms with their suffering and persecution. I am sure to some it felt like "suicide". Why would you choose to be a Christian, to be persecuted and scorned in public? Why would you choose to suffer?

I am convinced that these words of 1 Peter must have been like a safety rope thrown to them in a time that they must have felt like they were sinking in a deep sea! It gave them renewed courage to continue their struggle as people who listen to God. It helped them to remember whom they are serving. God is a shepherd caring for His flock unlike the human emperor who only thinks of himself. Unlike the human emperor God has all the power in this world and the world to come. They must humble themselves before God. He is the only one who has all the power!

They received His Holy Spirit. They belong to Him. They have nothing to fear. They must act according to their faith. They must trust Him with all their anxieties and worries. He will help them because He loves them.

And in the same way the same can be said to us. We are not openly persecuted although in a more subdued, sophisticated way we are. Daily you and I are exposed to all sorts of isms like materialism; and humanism, just to name a few. Materialism can let us believe that material things can make us happy and that we do not need God to make us feel guilty about all our earthly possessions. Humanism can lure us into believing that we as humans have everything in ourselves to make us whole and self-efficient. We do not need a God to help us overcome our anxieties and problems. We can only "go within" ourselves and realise our "own greatness".

I read an article this week that said exactly this. I will now quote to you a few lines: "You were born with an incredible gift –an authority more influential than you know. This inner power allows you to create and sustain your life as you please. You are able to reach great heights in all areas of your life, if you are willing to focus your energy on what you wish to create".

I found this article so sad - to think that you are stuck with yourself when you are alone in a boat with the storms raging above your head! Let us just think for a minute about ourselves and our inability to sort out some of the troubles and anxieties that often occur in our lives. How sad must it be not to trust in a God who is always available, who is much more powerful than any human being and definitely more powerful than all our problems and struggles together. How sad is it to trust only yourself while you and I know we are the most corrupt, unreliable creatures on this earth.

God saved us. God still saves us daily. He rescues us time and time again, one tragedy after another. He never ever goes back on His word. He never ever leaves us to suffer on our own. There is always an answer albeit not always the answer we want to hear or expected to hear.

We have a huge responsibility. The early Christians managed to start a whole new movement of people who trusted more in God than in any other human powers. They started a movement that survived all the centuries, wars, genocides and human persecutions. Yes their witness led other people to denounce their so-called trust in themselves to trust the Living God the maker of heaven and earth. The hope they shared in the After-life made it possible for them to sing hymns of praise while they died because of their faith. They were never beaten down or disheartened because they believed in the presence of God in their lives.

Why don't we have the same influence? Is it because our lives of faith lack conviction and commitment? Is it because we forget about who we really are? Is it because we do not hear the voice of the Shepherd anymore because we do not read from his Word? Is it because we have given over in so many ways to not praying anymore before we have a meal? Is it because we decide to be polite and not speak about Christ because it might be off-putting to others? Is it because we do what the world expects us to do while ignoring the Lord God. Is it because we are afraid of individuals who do not have faith?

We are persecuted daily and sadly many Christians do not even know it. The world is murdering our faith and when it dies, some of us would not even realise that it is dead already!

May the Lord speak to us all before next week's Gala day? May the Lord God give each one of us a wake-up call next week just in case we decide to stay in bed, or stay at home instead of walking in the parade under the banner of His church on earth!

Amen. It is certain and true. You and I do not belong to this world but to God and we must proclaim His message of salvation to all people.

Hallelujah!