

Easter 3 / April 26, 2020

1 Peter 1:17-25

*“Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”*

St. Peter addressed this letter to people living in a wide area of the Roman Empire; Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, the province of Asia and Bithynia. They came from varied ethnic backgrounds; some were Jews and others were Gentiles. Whatever things may have separated them, they had two things in common: Faith in Jesus and suffering because of their faith in Jesus! Christians in the first century faced opposition from a number of fronts; the state, local authorities, religious groups, family and friends. Christian religious practices were different from and often contrary to the religious practices of Roman society.

Religion was integral to Roman society. The well-being of the state and society was premised on the benign providence of the gods. Sacrifices were offered to the gods with the purpose of keeping them happy. Unhappy gods would not support the legions against the enemies of Rome, would not provide abundant harvests. If provoked, unhappy gods would send natural disasters and illnesses. Christians would not take part in the sacrifices to the gods and thus were seen as undermining the well-being of the whole community.

Christians did not take part in the civic religion, because they did not believe the Roman gods were gods. They would not worship them in obedience to the first commandment, “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” Even though they worshiped God and prayed for the emperor and the well-being of the Roman state, they were considered atheists. Atheism was a serious offense in Roman society and was grounds for social and political exclusion. Perhaps this sense of exclusion from the society and suspicion from the state is what Peter is talking about when he encourages believers to conduct themselves with fear throughout the time of their exile. However, no matter who or what was against them, Christians had two things to give them encouragement, assistance and hope; they had Christ and they had each other.

This is a time of exile from activities we enjoy and isolation from each other. Perhaps we feel like prisoners under house arrest. Nevertheless, we have the same things that encouraged and empowered the believers who first received this letter. We have Jesus and we have each other as sisters and brothers. We have been ransomed from sin and futility, death and despair, by the blood of Christ. We have been given the second birth of faith, through the word and by the washing of baptism. Although we are at a physical distance, we remain close to each other through the Holy Spirit, who binds us together as sisters and brothers in the body of Christ. We have been ransomed by the blood, born of the word and empowered to love others and each other purely from earnest hearts.

### **Ransomed by the blood**

Christians of the first century were seen as unreasonable and fanatical. It seemed unreasonable to the society at large, not to take part in the sacrifices and worship of the civic religion. There was music, dancing, a sacrifice, a few prayers and a barbeque. Religious leaders threw a bit of incense on the altar to acknowledge the deity of Caesar, which no really believed anyway and sought the protection of the Roman state. Everyone had a bit of fun. The gods were happy, the people were happy. But the Christians wouldn't take part. They wouldn't even come to the party. Why not? People didn't understand why Christians were so exclusive in their worship and so particular about the God they worshipped! Christians were so determined to worship their own God that they resisted even to the point of suffering violence from mobs and imprisonment by the authorities. It made no sense to practical minded Romans.

The reason why is contained in the name ‘Christian,’ which means ‘the possession of Christ.’ Christians believed they were the possession of Christ and of God through Him. In their writings, Christians commonly referred to themselves as ‘servants’ and ‘slaves of Christ.’ These words have a negative connotation in our society, involving racism, subservience and subjection, but in Roman society they implied ownership by right of purchase. Roman society was a slave society. Slaves were not high on the social ladder and being a slave could be a most unpleasant experience, slaves saved their money to purchase their freedom. But, Christians believed they belonged to Christ, not as a negative thing, but as a positive thing, because He loved them. Christians

believed Christ loved them so much that He had purchased them with the blood of His cross. To be a slave of Christ was to be free from bondage to sin and the condemnation of eternal death! It was a blessing to be ‘a slave of Christ.’ It was an honour to be called by His name! Because Christ purchased them with His blood, Christians sought to honour their Master with their lives!

Christian conduct in terms of worship and our relationship with other people is premised on the fact that we have been purchased, redeemed and ransomed by God, through the blood of Jesus’ cross. A servant receiving pay or a bondservant purchased for service with silver or gold, would always consider the will of her or his master when faced with choices of conduct. How much more should Christians consider the will of our master, who as Peter says ransomed us, “*not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*”

Christ’s blood is a ransom of greater value than all the gold and silver in the world, because He is God from eternity. But Christ’s blood shed for our ransom is also of greatest value, because it is the fullest expression of God’s love for human beings. Jesus loved us so much He became human. Christ loves us so much that He has ransomed all human beings from sin and death through the shedding of His blood on the cross. Our response to God in terms of worship, the way we live and interact with others, is always based on His love expressed in Christ Jesus. God loves us so much that He gave Jesus to ransom us from the wages of our sin and the effects of our sinful condition. We honour Christ with our lives, because Christ honoured us with His life and ransomed us to be His own possession, through His precious blood shed on the cross!

### **Empowered for brotherly love**

Christians stood out from the mass of Roman society, not simply because of things they refused to take part in; such as sacrifices to the Roman gods and sacrificing to the emperor as a god. Christians stood out, because of their love for God; expressed both to fellow believers in particular and to the Roman society in general. Christians wouldn’t come to the feasts held in honour of the gods, but they freely gave food to the hungry and poor. They went into prisons to provide inmates with food and water. These things were not provided by the Roman penal system. Prisoners relied on families and friends to bring them food. Failing that they relied on the generosity of fellow prisoners to share what family and friends had given them. Failing that they relied on Christians to seek them out and give them bread to eat and water to refresh their lips.

Christians did these things, not to get themselves into the good graces of God. They already were in God’s good graces for the sake of Jesus and the ransom He paid through the blood of His cross. Christians didn’t do these things to bring glory to themselves, so the Romans would see them as a benefit rather than a bane to society. Most Romans thought it was stupid to help convicts and a waste of food to give it away. Christians did these things to give thanks to God, to bring glory to God and to bring God to others, so that they too would know His love in Christ.

Christians did these and other things for people, because they saw Christ in their own suffering and in the suffering of other people. Jesus had shared in their humanity. They remembered Jesus’ words, “*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink...I was in prison and you came to me.*” They did these things, because they remembered that they too once were in bondage to their sins, without God and without hope in the world. They remembered they had received a rebirth of the spirit through living word of God. They may have remembered that their faith in Jesus began with an act of kindness from someone who called her or himself a Christian.

Peter encourages us in our faith in Christ and in the expression of our faith, by reminding us we have been ransomed from lives of futility and the hopelessness of death, by the blood of Christ. That’s our inspiration for faith and motivation for Christian living! One of the reasons the gospel had such a powerful effect and Christianity spread far and wide in the early centuries, was because of what Christians did and didn’t do. One thing they didn’t do was fight back! They didn’t resist when the authorities arrested them on false charges. When they were cursed, they blessed. When they were called atheists and a detriment to the state, they prayed for the emperor and sought God’s blessings for the empire. When they were wronged, they forgave! This made a deep impression on Roman society, even among their greatest haters. Secondly, they reached out to help others in our common needs as humans. They treated all people as humans, with love, dignity and respect. Because, that’s how God treats us in Christ Jesus!

## **Born of the word**

This Easter season as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus at a distance from the community of faith and from the larger community where we live, we have the opportunity to study the word of God, consider how we might apply it to our lives and express it in daily living. To say the word is very important is an understatement. It is the source of our life in Christ! It is the word of the gospel that gives us life as believers. Peter says we have been *“born again...through the living and abiding word of God.”* There is nothing more important than the word of God. It is through the word that the Spirit calls us to repentance and faith in Jesus. It is through the word and washing of baptism that the Holy Spirit daily drowns our sins and raises us to newness of life. If there was ever a time to seek strength, comfort and encouragement in the word, it is now!

This is a time made for the word of God! Through the word, Jesus speaks comfort to our hearts and gives us encouragement as we deal with the trials of life. The word of God inspires us to faith and empowers us, in Peter's words, *“to love one another earnestly from a pure heart.”* When the word of God is expressed in love, great things happen. People learn God loves them. People think God hates them and that's why people are getting sick and dying. When people discover God loves them and has given Jesus to be their Saviour, they come to faith in Him who loves them and redeemed them with His precious blood. Really that's what Easter is about. The word of God becoming a human being, bearing our sins on the cross, so we would be ransomed from futility and death; and rising so we would be born again through faith in His name. The word of the Lord gives us faith in Jesus and impels us to share His love with each other and with the whole community of human beings. A blessed Easter season. In His Name. Amen