

**To This You Have Been Called****1 St. Peter 2:19-25 &****St. John 10:11-16**

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Remember—think about—the way new Christians were brought into the Church in ancient times. During Lent they were taught the faith and asked to make a real *commitment* to Christ and to his Body. They were baptised at Easter, bringing them into the Body of Christ. At their baptism they were dressed in white robes to symbolise their having been washed clean by Jesus. They were given candles as a reminder that they now bore the light of Christ as they went out into the world—to be visibly different—to be Easter people who lived new life in the power of the Resurrection. These Eastertide Epistles and Gospels were selected to teach the Church what it means and what it looks like to live that resurrection life—to be a first course of lessons for those new believers, but also to remind those of us who have been here for a while—to call us back to those first things, those basic things of the faith that we sometimes take for granted or that we sometimes even forget.

I think these lessons are especially important for us today—or at least they *should* be. One thing that strikes me as I read the history of the Church is just how effective those early Christians were in living out their new life, in holding high the light of Christ in a dark world, and in drawing others to Jesus. Those first three hundred years were a time of persecution for the Church, and yet the way Christians responded to that persecution, the way they responded to sin and evil in the world, drew

men and women to Jesus in droves. They weren't perfect. There were problems in those days. Plenty of Christians renounced their faith when persecution came, some fought back, but most didn't. Most of those Christians lived their lives faithfully, even sometimes to the point of death, and because of them the kingdom grew.

But friends, something's changed since then. Eventually the light spread so far that people started to equate "Western Civilisation" with "Christendom". We had, as much as we can say such a thing is possible, a "Christian society". And then we got lazy. Committing to Jesus didn't mean what it did in those early days—in fact, for the most part, we *didn't* commit to Christ—we were just born Christians. We held the faith more and more superficially. And worse, since virtually everyone was a Christian and since we were all born into the Church, we stopped evangelising. Gradually more and more people became nothing more than nominal Christians with no commitment to Jesus, and more and more they simply turned their backs on the Church—and the more who turned their backs on the Church, the more our society became less and less committed to Christian principles and Christian morality. And now we've realised what's happening, we realise that we're now in a post-Christian culture—we even now are beginning to experience occasional a new hostility to our faith and we don't know what to do. The early Christians knew what to do: When you're in the dark, let your light burn brightly and hold it high! Draw others to it. But we've lost that. We've let our lights burn down. They're dim. They're ineffective. And we don't really realise how dim they are—probably because there are so few truly bright lights for comparison. We wonder why people are turning away from our dim light, why they're not

interested. And so we try drawing them with other things. We set our lights aside and we try to legislate people into living like Christians—after all, there are still enough of us committed to Christian morality that, at least for a few more years, we have power at the polls and power in the legislature. But we forget that passing laws that force people to live by Christian standards in public, doesn't change what they do in private and doesn't solve their basic problem—they need *Jesus*. Or our churches turn to worldly means to draw people in. We turn worship into a show—"worshiptainment"—and instead of preaching the Scriptures, preaching Christ, preaching that men and women are sinners and that the cross is our only hope—we turn the pulpit into a platform for preaching self-help and tickling itching ears. Sure, we draw people in, but we're converting them to programs and motivational speakers—not to Jesus. We entice people with what Jesus can do for them, but we don't preach that Jesus is Lord and deserves our all, our *everything*. Jesus tells us that to follow him means to bear a cross. In today's Church we're happy to let Jesus bear his cross for us, but there's little if any teaching on the fact that to follow him, we need to bear our own crosses—we need to follow him in his example of suffering. Sure, all of this draws people in, but it doesn't make them Christians—it just gives them a false assurance that when they die they'll be okay. We end up with churches full of people seeking God's blessing instead of fulfilling their true purpose and seeking themselves to bless God—truly living the life of the kingdom, sure in the knowledge that Jesus is Lord. Brothers and sisters, what we need more than anything is to be true people of the Resurrection. We need to let the Easter message sink in and really and truly transform our lives, so that we no longer live as we once did, we

no longer live as the world does, but we live for Jesus and we model Jesus to the world around us. We take our lights—that light of Christ that was given to us in our baptism—kindle it, feed it with God’s Word, feed it with God’s sacraments, feed it with the Holy Spirit, feed it with our fellowship and our love for each other; feed it with the grace of God working in us so that it burns brightly—so that it shows radically transformed lives to the world.

Think of all the people that St. Peter influenced by holding his light high and by burning it brightly. And yet think about what he was like before he was *Saint* Peter. He was a simple fisherman, probably a pretty “salty” guy. Yes, he was a Jew and must have been faithful to some degree before Jesus got to him, but his thinking was very worldly. It was far from Christian. When Jesus told him that his mission was to die, Peter was adamant: “No, Lord! No way, not you!” When the soldiers came to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, Peter was the one who came prepared with a sword and attacked one of the soldiers, cutting off his ear. That was Peter: impetuous, violent, not afraid of a fight. How many people knew *that* Peter? I wonder how many people had maybe been in a barroom brawl with Peter at some point. And so it seems very appropriate that the words of today’s Epistle come from him. Look at 1 Peter 2:19-25 and consider the change that people who knew Peter would have witnessed in him. He says:

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

Peter was writing this around A.D. 62 or 63 from Rome. Since his time with Jesus he had learned something about cross-bearing and about

persecution. He had faced the rabid persecution of the Jews, twenty years earlier he had been locked away in prison by Herod Agrippa. But he had endured persecution with humility because Jesus had transformed him—it was a work of *grace* in his life. The old Peter would have gone to battle—probably got himself killed resisting arrest or knocked heads together in a street brawl in Jerusalem. But *Saint* Peter was ready to count it all as the cost of discipleship—the cost of following Jesus. He was ready to take up his cross and follow his Lord—all the way to death, if necessary. He writes, literally, “For this *is* grace”—this is what it means to live your life in the grace of God, not by the desire of the flesh or the way of the world. You have the example of Jesus before you, showing you the right way to respond—to endure suffering and persecution with humility and grace. He says:

For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? [That’s a no-brainer. Being punished for sin is just—it’s deserved suffering.] But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. (1 Peter 2:20)

This is where Jesus calls us to be different and that means this is one of those area of life that demands a change on our part. If we’re willing to suffer graciously for the good we do—for following Christ—our lights are going to shine brightly. History bears it out; when Christians are humble in the face of persecution, the Church always grows. The severity of the persecution may vary—there are times when Christians have been martyred for their faith and other times when persecution has been little more than an inconvenience—but Peter

reminds us: this isn’t optional; this is what it means to commit to Jesus and to truly follow him. He just comes right out and says it in verse 21:

For to this you have been called, [This is as much our mission as anything else. Why?] **because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.** [All we have to do is look at his example.] **He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.** [He was perfect in every way. Jesus never endured a just punishment for sin, because he never sinned.] **When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten,** [Think of him being beaten by the chief priest’s soldiers, being dragged before Pilate, being beaten senseless by Roman soldiers, and then being nailed to a cross while the crowd jeered at him.] **but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.** (1 Peter 2:21-23)

It’s not just that we have Jesus’ example to follow. Is suffering a hard thing? You bet it is. That’s why Jesus likens it to cross-bearing. But Peter also reminds us that we have hope and faith in a higher judge. Jesus trusted in his Father and so can we. We know that God has a greater plan for us and for the world. And if we are in Christ, we should have an eternal, not an earthly perspective. For the people of the world—the people living in darkness—this is all there is. You’ve got to look out for “Number One”, you’ve got to protect your rights, because if you don’t get the most out of life before you die, you don’t get another chance—there’s nothing more. That’s why the cross is foolish to the world. Why sacrifice yourself for others? If someone takes what’s yours or steps

on your rights, you take them back, you put up a fight! That was Peter's attitude when Jesus told him that his mission was the cross. That was Peter's attitude when he drew his sword and attacked the soldiers. But in light of Jesus and his mission and sacrifice, Peter learned better. Jesus didn't come into the world to demand what was his or to look out for "Number One". In fact, his mission was exactly the opposite: to set the glory aside that was his by right as God and to allow himself to be crucified for the sake of the very people who crucified him—to offer his life for the lives of his enemies. And now Peter's calling us to follow the example of Jesus. Our redemption has already been bought by the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, but as we follow his example of self-sacrifice, we bear testimony to what Jesus did. His death and resurrection brought light to us and by following his example we show that light to the world. Peter goes on:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:24-25)

Jesus died that we might live—that we might be made holy—and so he calls us to live to righteousness—to be a holy people. And that's why we *will* face persecution: the world doesn't like holy people—it's hated holiness all the back to when Cain killed Abel. In a sense, persecution is the test of whether or not we're truly following Jesus.

Let me also say: Peter reminds us that suffering is a means of grace. There are circles in the Church these days that are teaching that suffering and sickness and persecution aren't

God's will for anyone and that if you're suffering any of these things, what you're really suffering from is a lack of faith. That's dangerous teaching, but it's appealing. It's infiltrated a lot of churches—including some in our own community—because it tickles itching ears and appeals to our worldliness. And yet that sort of teaching stops our ears to the voice of God as he tries to get our attention—as he tries to grow us in our faith, to grow us in his grace, and to kindle our lights to burn more brightly. Isaac Williams put it this way: "We speak of disappointments, of troubles, of enemies, and quarrels; nay, even of death itself, in another manner to that of Scripture. [We think of them as bad things.] For what is sorrow of heart within but the voice of the good Shepherd seeking us? what is affliction but His struggle in order to free and disentangle us from the thorns of the world? what are dissensions and ill-will from without but the means by which He would mould us more in conformity with Himself? what are worldly dangers but occasions of His drawing us more nearly unto His side? and what is death itself to the good Christian but the gathering of His own more securely into His arms, from which nothing hereafter shall ever draw them away?" It's not that God wants us to suffer, but that he wants to focus our eyes on eternity and wants us to grow in holiness and in faith, and to learn to lean on him for our strength. And as we see throughout the Scriptures, suffering and persecution are often the most effective ways for us to learn these lessons. They are truly means of grace.

And if suffering is a means of grace, then we know that God is truly looking out for us as we experience it. As I said earlier, St. Peter had endured his own share of suffering

for his faith and these words of his would be particularly encouraging just a year or two after he wrote them, when Nero would blame the Christians for Rome's burning. After the early persecution of the Church by the Jews, Nero's persecution would be one of the most intense. Horrible things were done to the Christians in and around Rome, but as they were sent to the arena or crucified like Peter, they could do so graciously knowing that the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls was looking out for them.

And we have an excellent illustration of this from Jesus' own lips in our Gospel—maybe an illustration that Peter had in mind when he wrote his epistle. Jesus says:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:11-16)

Jesus isn't just an example to follow in his suffering. He's also our loving caretaker as his flock faces persecution and suffering—that is, after all, why he gave his life for us! As I was studying this week, I ran across this beautiful commentary on the Good Shepherd by F.W. Robertson:

“Beneath the burning skies and the clear starry nights of Palestine there grows up between the shepherd and his flock an union of attachment and tenderness. It is the country where at any moment sheep are liable to be swept away by some mountain-torrent, or carried off by hill-robbers, or torn by wolves. At any moment their protector may have to save them by personal hazard...Every hour of the shepherd's life is risk. Sometimes for the sake of an armful of grass in the parched summer days, he must climb precipices almost perpendicular, and stand on a narrow ledge of rock, where the wild goat will scarcely venture. Pitiless showers, driving snows, long hours of thirst—all this he must endure, if the flock is to be kept at all. “And thus there grows up between the man and the dumb creatures he protects, a kind of friendship... You love those for whom you risk, and they love you; therefore it is that, not as here where the flock is driven, the shepherd goes before and the sheep follow him. They follow in perfect trust, even though he should be leading them away from a green pasture, by a rocky road, to another pasture they cannot yet see...Hirelings are shepherds, but not good shepherds...they are tested by danger...Now a man is a hireling when he does his duty for pay. He may do it in his way faithfully. The paid shepherd would not desert the sheep for a shower or a cold night. But the lion and the bear—he is not paid to risk his life against them, and the sheep are not his, so he leaves them to their fate...The cause of the sheep is not *his* cause.”

Brothers and sisters, we can take comfort and ground our faith in the fact that *we are his cause!* We were Jesus' cause in life two thousand years ago when he went to the cross, offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and we are still just as much his

cause now that our redemption is accomplished—even in our suffering. We were his cause when he made it possible for us to live as light in the darkness and we continue to be his cause as we live as his light—as he works in us graciously to kindle our light so that it will shine brighter.

Every Sunday should be a reminder to us of this reality. As we gather to celebrate the Resurrection—that's what every Sunday is—he comes to us as our Good Shepherd in Word and Sacrament. He, the eternal Word of God, speaks to us as we hear his Word read to us in the Scriptures and explained from the pulpit and as he graciously invites us to his Table to partake of his Body and Blood shed for us.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” Those words are fulfilled as he speaks to us from the Scriptures, where he reveals himself, his ways, and his truths to us. And yet what we do here on Sunday in hearing God's Word, sets an example that we should all be following daily ourselves as we steep ourselves in the Scriptures. No day should pass without our reading at least a short passage of Scripture—without our hearing the Shepherd's voice. Father Parsch put it beautifully: “As often as we read the Bible, we should feel like sheep of the flock, lying at the feet of the Good Shepherd. He knows me, and it is my desire to learn to know Him better and better.” Can you say that yourself?

But at his Table—in the Holy Communion—our Shepherd makes himself known in an even deeper way. The Word gives us knowledge of God, his ways, and his will, but the Sacrament applies the grace of the Word in a deeply significant

way. The Holy Communion reminds us that our knowledge of God isn't just head-knowledge—not just knowing *about* him. It reminds us that we *know* him *personally*—that we're mystically united to him, our spirits to his Spirit. He says, “He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood, abides in me, and I in him.” By his shed Body and Blood he unites us with himself in loving fellowship and so as we come to his Table we should feel ourselves truly the sheep of his pasture. He feeds us here—feeds us with his grace—so let his grace kindle your light so that it shines brightly. Let him be your shepherd. Follow him even though it means taking up your cross. Pursue holiness even though it means sufferings. And let your light burn brightly for the world to see.

Let us pray: “Almighty God, who gave your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life; give us grace that we may always receive with thankfulness the immeasurable benefit of his sacrifice, and also daily endeavour to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”