

Sermon Given by

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1 Peter 3:15 - "A reason for hope"

Introduction

On 6th November last year the Guardian newspaper ran an opinion piece with the headline – ‘stand up, stand up against Jesus’. The article explained how churches promote cruelty, ignorance, and civil rights abuses, and have no real place in a civilised society. We live in a country in which an increasing number of influential voices seem actively hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in which the persecution of Christians is increasing. There has never been a time, then, in which Christians have had greater cause to argue for the hope that is in them. As we consider the message of 1 Peter 3.15 this morning, I’m going to make three points – that Christians are called to be distinctive, that this distinctiveness is characterised by the hope that is in us, and that the purpose of this distinctiveness is to bring others into God’s family.

Christians are called to be distinctive

Firstly, then, Christians are called to be distinctive. I’ve just mentioned the increasing antagonism to Christianity in public life, but we should not be surprised if the good news of Jesus brings division and controversy. The Christian message inevitably divides because it is so scandalous, because it preaches Christ crucified, a stumbling block to some and sheer folly to others. It is a message which tears at worldly power, which strips away our pride and searches our rebellious hearts. It is a message for which Stephen was stoned, and for which Paul was put in chains.

We should not be surprised, then, if our lives or witness, either individually or as a church, generate friction – rather we should be surprised if they do not. We must be always asking ourselves whether we are living distinctively Christian lives, whether our lives are raising the question to which the gospel is the answer. That image of believers as distinct from the world, strangers to it, runs throughout the Bible – Abraham is called out of his own country, the Israelites are described as aliens in the land of Egypt and Jesus’ life is marked by rejection, as One who ‘came to His own, but His own did not receive Him’. 1 Peter as a whole emphasises that Christians are ‘aliens’ and ‘exiles’, experiencing, as those born again into a living hope, a new distance from their surrounding culture. Christians are freed from those shackles under which the world labours, freed through the redemption of Jesus, freed from the meaninglessness of sin and the hopelessness of death. In the midst of this world, we are called into a community of the faithful, called to proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light, and so called to follow in the footsteps of our crucified Messiah.

How we are distinctive – we have a hope that is in us

Christians, then, are called to be distinctive. What is it, exactly, that makes us distinctive? *What* is it that we are to give a reason for? Well, what makes us distinctive, according to verse 15, is the '*hope that we have*', or – more accurately in the Greek – the '*hope that is in us*'.

The idea of hope is central in 1 Peter, so that we often find him writing 'hope' where we would expect to find 'faith'. This is because Peter is writing to Christians undergoing persecution, and hope is precisely faith as it looks to the future of God's salvation – hope is the form that faith takes under the threat of death, a hope that is not wishful thinking but firmly grounded in the redemption that Jesus has established for us. In this way hope becomes both the *courage* for our witness and the *content* of our witness, hope is the distinguishing mark of our Christian existence. Throughout his letter, Peter reassures his readers that they are safe from true harm, and blessed even in suffering, because their God rules the future and their vindication is near.

Christians, then, have a hope, and it is in our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Over the next few weeks, there's going to be a series of sermons in the morning services on 'gospel truths to live by', and this will give us a chance to be reminded of the content of the hope that we share in more detail. But I think the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer has a pretty good summary - 'I believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the world, I believe in God the Son, who hath redeemed me, and all mankind, I believe in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God'. We were made for relationship with God, to know Him and enjoy Him forever, to find life in all its fullness through giving that life over to Him, and to wait for that day when there will be no more tears, when all things will be made new, and when every eye shall see Him as He is. We should be amazed and excited by the hope that God has given us, by the great work that He is bringing to completion in each and every one of our lives.

This wonderful hope, though, is not just an abstract intellectual thing 'out there', to be grasped by the mind, but a personal, living thing 'in here', to be grasped by the heart. The good news is that we can put our hope and trust not in a programme or a list of propositions, but in a Person who came to earth for us, and comes to us still in our hearts. Peter's language here is very intimate – he literally instructs his readers to give a reason 'for the hope that is in you'. This is referring back to the previous verse, which tells us not to be troubled or frightened by persecutors, but in our hearts to set apart Christ as Lord. Our identity as believers brings us into an intimate personal relationship with Christ – as the prayer before Communion puts it – 'that we may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us'. Christ, we might say, is brought closer to us than we are to ourselves, we are to be changed by Him from the inside out. Our hope, then, is internal and personal, rather than external and abstract. Here again, though, there is a challenge to us – are we, day by day, setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts, are we making room for him in our lives, are we welcoming him in – or are there obstacles that we are still putting up, parts of our existence over which we would rather not have Christ as our sovereign Lord? The Spirit of Christ sanctifies us, makes us holy as He is holy, but He must be allowed to do His work, to transform us by His grace

and love. This is our challenge, day by day, to give ourselves anew to Christ, and say to him, 'not my will, but Your will be done'.

Why we are distinctive – to glorify God as His children and to bring others into His family

So, we are distinctive because we have a hope that is in us. What then, is the *purpose* of having this hope? What is the *point* of being distinctive? Is it just to make sure that I will get into heaven? Is it to give us an excuse to completely separate from the 'world' and to turn inwards in a holy huddle? No, our calling is to be distinctively engaged with the world, as the redeemed community of the church. We are graciously given this living hope in us for two reasons – to glorify God as His beloved adopted children, and to bring others into God's family. It is the second of these that Peter dwells on. He encourages his readers to 'be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you'. It literally says 'be prepared to give a defence', and it may be that Peter particularly had in mind those Christians called before Roman law courts to face hostile accusers. We know from Acts that Paul often turned such occasions into a chance to proclaim the gospel, and in our reading from Colossians he makes the point that there will be lots of providentially-placed opportunities in everyday life for this kind of witness. Peter is saying, then, that we should be ready to explain the hope that we have, and to commend it to unbelieving enquirers. In this sense, then, we are all to be evangelists – it is not just a job for clever or articulate people, not just a job for the well-trained or the quick-witted, but it is the calling of each of us to give an account of the hope that we have.

Now, 'giving an answer' will partly mean being able to explain what we believe, explain the heart of the Christian message. This doesn't mean we've got to know our Bible backwards or have a degree in Theology – we just need to be able, simply and clearly, to witness to our trust in Jesus. It's also a very good opportunity to correct people's common misconceptions about the faith, and so to allow space for the Holy Spirit to do His work in the heart of the enquirer. There are lots of helpful books to recommend to non-Christian friends who raise particular questions about Jesus or the Christian faith, and to read ourselves – two of the best I've found are 'the Case for Christ' by Lee Strobel, in which a former sceptic assesses the evidence for Jesus and who He was; and Tim Keller's 'The Reason for God', which goes through lots of common objections that people have. Let's not, though, be unrealistic in what we expect from this kind of encounter – St. Ambrose put this well when he said 'it did not suit God to save His people by arguments', and no amount of evidence can ultimately compel someone to believe it, since belief requires the assent not just of the mind but also of the will – God wants our love of Him to be freely given, He does not coerce. As CS Lewis put it, 'the irresistible and indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of God's scheme forbids Him to use – merely to over-ride a human will would be for Him useless – he cannot ravish, he can only woo'. In encounters with non-Christians, we should all be ready to help woo them to God.

What's important, though, is that just as being a Christian is not simply an intellectual assent to certain propositions, so commending Christianity to others is not simply an exercise in winning an academic argument, but in pointing to our Saviour. The limelight is not to fall on our cleverness but on His Person. After preaching John Wesley would sum up what he was

doing with the words 'I offered them Christ' – whether it was through what he said, or the way that he said it, or who he was. And notice how Peter immediately connects 'giving a reason' for our hope with the way in which we do it – we are to do it with 'gentleness and respect', with a 'good conscience'. We are called to proclaim the gospel not only with our lips but in our lives – our evangelism is the out-flowing of an authentic Christian life, it is not separable from the lifestyle that we lead – just as our own affirmation of Christ is not simply a matter of our heads but also of our hearts. Peter and Paul are saying that we are to be walking gospels – as we set Christ apart in our hearts so those with whom we come into contact will feel the need to ask – 'why are you like that', 'why are you different?'. So evangelism is not simply a 'special' thing we do at certain times, rather evangelistic opportunities arise out of our living sincerely and transparently Christian lives. We are to be 'joined-up' Christians, living a life in which belief and practice are an integrated whole. And the model for the kind of response we should make is Jesus Himself – the 'gentleness' referred to here links to what Paul elsewhere terms the 'meekness and gentleness of Christ'. We are to conform our imperfect lives, through the power of the Spirit, to the model of His perfect life. We are not to look on those non-Christians we meet as targets for our arguments, or as abstract subjects for conversion, but must look on them, as Jesus looked on the rich young man, with love, and out of Christlike love for them speak words of persuasive truth.

What if we don't feel we're distinctive– *assurance in bread and wine*

Christians then are called to be distinctive because we have a living hope that is in us, a hope that transforms us from the inside out, transforms our thoughts and actions, and so both encourages us with the confidence, and provides us with the opportunities, to give an account of our hope to others, with our lips and in our lives.

Before closing, I just want to make one final point – what do we do if we don't feel capable of all this, if we don't really think we're living distinctively, if our day to day lives are marked by repeated lapses into sin, our minds often plagued with doubt, if the words of the hymn really strike home – 'weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought'. What if, in short, we don't feel particularly confident that we have a hope within us? Well, there are many ways God provides to keep the coals of our faith glowing – the fellowship of the church family, daily prayer, Bible reading, and so on – but it seems appropriate in this service to mention a particular means of grace that can encourage us in our Christian lives – the Lord's Supper. God knows our human frailties, He knows how easily we slip and fall, and so He provides for us something concrete, something tangible, to give us assurance. In bread and wine we meet with Jesus, He reassures us that He is with us in every moment of our lives, closer to us than we are to ourselves, guiding our steps and setting our path; He reminds us that on the cross He died for us, out of a love that is greater than we will ever know; and He feeds us with Himself, through bread and wine; He feeds us for service, to be witnesses for Him wherever we go and whatever we do. We live for Him, and He is forever in us.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)