

Imitating Christ

From the Epistle: 1 St. Peter ii. 19 ff.
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 172

19 For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. 20 For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. 21 For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: 22 Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: 23 Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: 24 Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. 25 For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

You may have noted that today's Collect, Epistle, and Gospel all contain the theme that our Lord Jesus Christ set an example for us in the way in which He lived His life. In concentrating on His great work of atonement, we often forget that He is also our supreme exemplar, the perfect model of all that He taught and preached. If children find it almost natural to imitate older siblings whom they unabashedly admire, we must feel no shame or embarrassment in similarly copying our Lord in all His behavior. After all, even St. Paul made this unusual declaration: *Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ* (1 Cor. 11:1).

In imitating the actions, attitudes, and words of Christ, though established two millennia ago, we find a template for every situation we encounter today. For even though the times and circumstances have indeed greatly changed, the basic dynamics that are at work in all human interaction remain unaltered. The virtues still remain the virtues, and the vices still remain vices. In fact, it is this strongly held insistence on the part of the Christian that the essential nature of man has remained absolutely unchanged, in spite of any progress he boasts, that fills the believer with conviction about the power of the original Gospel message to work in our day. This is why a Christian may be labelled "conservative": he wishes to conserve what he knows is unalterable. He shuns the idea that the human soul has somehow advanced itself through time and by its own effort, rendering religious dependency unnecessary.

Our Epistle points out the character of Christ with respect to how he dealt with unjust and unfair pressure, and this is today's sermon's focus. (If you observe next Sunday's Epistle, you'll see that today's quote from 1 St. Peter 2 comes just after it.) The concept of "rights" is a very big one in American culture: "The Bill of Rights." "I have my rights". "You have no right to remove my rights", and onward it goes. We all acknowledge, of course, that today we are smothered in such rhetoric, because the concept of reasonable rights has morphed into demands, angry expectations, and deserved entitlements. Creedal statements such as the United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" have a strangely unhinged quality when there is no reference

made to God, in whose image man was made, and therefore is the only reason he can lay any claim to the dignities espoused in such documents.

It's not as if we argue that under God, men shouldn't have the "unalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness endowed by their Creator" that our own Declaration of Independence so eloquently lays out. But in a time when rights are stuffed into the loudest mouth demanding them, like a bird feeding its hungry brood, we must look once again at Christ, who left us an example in how He suffered.

Did the Son of God have any rights? Of course! He had *all* rights. He had every right, every conceivable one. As the Creator, as the Owner and Establisher of all, His claim to anything or everything was without argument. But this is precisely where His example is so powerful. Having been in the undeniable position of asserting Himself against the rebellion and abuse fomented against Him by humankind, the work of His own hands, He chose instead the completely improbable course of submitting Himself to it, following it through to its extreme end. As St. Paul described it in Phillipians 2:

5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made himself of no reputation [emptied himself] , and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

St. Peter presents the pattern of Christ to the believer who *suffers wrongfully*. It is here where the actions of our Lord are exceedingly instructive. In Peter's day, it was violent persecution that was underway against the church. It would have been the very human temptation of Christians to fight fire with fire, to answer their tormentors with abuse and anger, to return evil for evil. How would I, after all, react to the seizure of my property, or being consigned to the shameful place of a second-class citizen, or being blamed unfairly for all of the evils that had come upon the Roman empire? If I had had recourse (as I do today), would I have filed suit against my persecutors? Called the police? Written a letter to the editor? Contacted my congressman? Adorned my car with bumper stickers?

Would I have asked myself, "What is the point of becoming a doormat for a bunch of wicked infidels? Maybe there will be an election, and we can vote 'em out. They have no right to do these things. I'll make sure that justice is served!"

But Jesus is the picture of submission:

He was oppressed , and he was afflicted , yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb , so he openeth not his mouth. (Is. 53:7)
He refuses the joys and pleasures of the activist, of making a show of His persecution and drawing attention to His plight. The only impulse He demonstrates is one of placing complete, unqualified faith in His Heavenly Father: *Who, when he was reviled , reviled not again ; when he suffered , he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously...*

So, we ask, how does this affect life today? Let me suggest some very real ways. We live in times of great polarization, of a tremendous divergence of opinion among Americans, and in the wider world, between those who are embracing secularism, and those who cling to religious faith. It is clear, at least at this point in history, that the former are gaining the upper hand, at least in terms of occupying and maintaining positions of power and influence. A thousand virtual pulpits unceasingly preach the doctrines of worldliness. It's as if the secular gospel just can't be packaged, wrapped, and exported fast enough to serve this strange compulsion that strives to eradicate any place for God in hearts and lives .

What shall I do? Fight back? Well, I needn't abandon the democratic means of expression that are indeed a part of my rights as a citizen of a free nation which has enshrined them, even if the country itself is indifferent to them. But my principal power is in how I *endure grief, suffering wrongfully*. Jesus, after all, did everything He could to convince the people of who He was, before they cruelly manhandled Him. He preached, He taught, He bore witness, and did not back down before the hostility of arbitrary authority. But in the end, His victory was secured by His *patient* acceptance of His lot, with a *conscience toward God*. How could He do this? Because He knew the outcome. Although the storyline was extremely difficult, and filled with tragedy, He was thoroughly convinced of the content of the last chapter.

I believe these days are an opportunity to do what the Scripture calls *building up ourselves in our most holy faith* (Jude 20). Although we have no idea what the future will bring. It seems fair to say that the course of history is swinging in a certain direction. We know from the past century that world-changing events can be precipitated when men are most unawares, tranquilizing themselves with the elixir of denial, placing all their hopes on meetings, councils, and international initiatives. But building up our faith will prepare us to glorify God in the manner in which we meet pressures against the Church, just as first century believers needed apostolic instruction to endure their own fiery trials. We must seek to vastly increase our confidence in God. That is the long and the short of it.

The result, says St. Peter, is that our actions and choices will prove *acceptable with God*. He takes great delight in our efforts at obedience! He closely watches us, to see how we will handle those influences which, in His divine authority, He permits to enter our lives. Never has He subjected His people to anything that He has not foreordained to some specific, beneficial end.

Hallelujah! Glory be to God.

Help us, Lord, to walk in our calling: following Christ *in His steps*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.