

1 Peter 1:3-9  
2 Easter / Year A  
30 March 2008

*Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

*By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:3b-7)*

The epistles of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter along with James, Jude and the three letters of John are commonly referred to as the Catholic Epistles. This title comes from the fact that these were letters written for the wider church as opposed to a specific faith community or church like most of Paul's epistles were. Unfortunately we don't hear from these epistles very often for they rarely appear in the lectionary. During Year A, which we are in now, we will read much of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter during this Easter season, but that is basically it for another three years. We only hear from James five times during Year B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter twice during the three-year lectionary cycle and we don't read from Jude at all.

I raise this issue because during the early church these epistles played an important role. Today they are practically unknown to most modern Christians. What happened to the Catholic Epistles, why are they now second-class scriptures? Did they suddenly become irrelevant along the way?

Since our epistle lesson this morning comes from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, let's take a closer look. The salutation to this letter, the first two verses, identifies the audience as the "exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." As we look at the context of the letter as a whole, these "exiles" were most likely Christian converts from paganism facing hostility from friends, associates and relatives who did not understand or believe their conversion.

Suffering for the sake of the Gospel is a major theme in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter. In fact, it is a major theme throughout the Catholic Epistles. Perhaps that is why these letters have lost favor with modern people in modern civilization. Few of us in the Western world face trials and tribulation on account of our faith. Certainly that isn't true everywhere and perhaps in places like Laos, Myanmar or Burma, the Sudan, and North Korea, these epistles still have immense power within the Christian communities there. For in these places today Christians are living in great hardship and are even dying because of their faith.

As I was jotting down notes on this passage this week it wasn't that portion of the text exhorting the persecuted to rejoice in their suffering that drew my attention. What drew my attention was that portion exhorting the faithful to be and always remain hopeful. That is something that all of us need to embrace.

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice... (*1 Peter 1:3b-6a*)

The living hope being spoken of here is a dangerous thing and yet it is the only thing. Where else in this life can we turn that doesn't lead to our own demise if not the hope in that which resides beyond ourselves, in that which is greater than ourselves? I want to read for you a statement made by the late great Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador who was assassinated, shot through the heart, as he celebrated the mass on March 24<sup>th</sup> 1980. Here is what he said:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our

lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. **This is what we are about** (emphasis mine). We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.<sup>i</sup>

Even though we are not persecuted for our faith as some are, facing daily trials and tribulations and even death on account of our faith, our lives are short. We have a keen sense of that every time we say, "My gosh where have the years gone." Our hope is beyond us, in a future that we place in God's capable hands. Certainly we are called to spend our lives struggling against that which seeks to harm and distort all that God made, laying foundations for future development, but in the end, we look to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come as that which gives meaning and security. We can't touch it or feel it, but we can claim it by faith in the one who rose for us and now sits on the right hand of God the father.

It is in the name of Jesus, the name above all names that I offer this sermon to you this morning; Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *Homelitics*, March, April 2008, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 43