I Peter 3:13-22 Be Prepared

Are you someone who invests heavily in preparations or more of a last minute.com/take it as it comes sort of a person?

There has been a great example of good preparation going on in the valley recently. As you may know, last week the Cooke family bought their first dog and they have been in a flurry of preparation, puppy proofing the rectory and the garden, borrowing equipment, reading books about how to look after puppies.

We all probably have memories though of times when we didn't prepare and were caught out – perhaps we didn't revise enough for an exam, or we didn't check our passports were in date before arriving at the airport.

In previous passages earlier in this book, we have noticed that Peter has often urged us to be alert, to be prepared, to gird up our loins as the KJV puts it, to be ready.

Today we are going to start by looking at what Peter says in this passage about being prepared but in case you are wondering, we are not going to look closely at the quite tricky verses in the middle of our passage (about imprisoned spirits and Noah). Many other eminent theologians have struggled with these verses and I think we would too: Martin Luther said:

"*A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.*"

Let's begin in v.15 with a practical way Peter wants us to be prepared for action:

v.15: Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience…"

We know from stories in Acts that Peter had to defend his faith in hostile courts of law. In many countries now that is still the case. Explaining why you have faith in Jesus can lead to imprisonment, torture, even death today in many parts of the world. Here in the UK it is unlikely but still possibly – Christians have been taken to court for praying in "No prayer" zones and have been sacked for wearing a small cross to work. But for most of us, the most that will happen if we do speak about the hope we have is that people might mock us or speak negatively to others about us.

When did someone last ask you to explain why you have hope? Are we living lives so distinctively Christ centred that people notice we are different and want to know why? Do we have different values, priorities and behaviour from everyone else or are we instead staying safe and managing to blend in so well with all that the world values that we have lost our distinctiveness?

v.15 "Revere Christ as Lord" – If we take obedience to Christ and his commands seriously, then surely people will notice something different, whether that difference makes them ridicule us or makes them hungry for what we have.

When they do ask, Peter wants us to be ready with the answer, to be able to explain what our faith is and why we have it. Not in order to win an argument but to win the soul, as Peter says here in

v.15/16: "with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience."

Perhaps you are at a dinner, and someone realises you are a Christian and asks you why God allows suffering or says "surely there are many roads to God", or that "you can't really believe what the Bible says"? Are we able to answer clearly, simply and quickly before they lose interest? I thought of asking us each to practice giving a simple explanation of what the good news about Jesus consists of but realised it would take too long. Maybe we will manage to practice that together in the future but for now let's each do our homework and work out what we might say.

At a bare minimum the good news we could share from v. 18-22 might be that:

Jesus Christ was without sin yet stood before a holy God in the place of us who do sin and took the death penalty for our sin on himself to bring us to God. So now we who were cut off from a holy God can be brought into a right relationship to him. Because he conquered death and rose again, we can receive the gift of eternal life – our salvation.

Or we could each plan a simple testimony of how we came to faith and what difference it has made.

Having a supple of some of those little booklets which explain the gospel can also help. I first came to faith sitting in my office in Sotheby's reading some bible verses in a little booklet that someone I worked with had sent me. It was as if a light came on and God revealed to my heart what Jesus had done on the cross for me so that I could make it my own.

I think though that in this passage Peter is also wanting us to prepare for something else important. Verses 14, 16, 17 and elsewhere in the letter he is assuming that at some point we will face suffering.

We live in a fallen world, full of sin and that leads to all sorts of bad things which hurt people and hurt the world we live in. Just look around this building and notice how many of us have gone through really tough times in the last year and many who are going through them now.

We are not going to try answering the big question "Why does God allow suffering" today but we may do so later in this letter where Peter spends more time talking about suffering. But we can see one essential fact to take on board:

v.18 "For Christ suffered once for sins (or once for all), the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God."

God could stay at a distance, remove himself from the suffering in this world, but instead he chose to throw himself right into it, to taste what the worst of it is like, so that in some way he is able to go through it with us when we suffer.

What happens when a crisis hits us? Whether sickness, the loss of a loved one, financial disaster or redundancy. For most of us one of our immediate reactions is probably fear. Fear of what will happen, of how we will cope, of pain. The most repeated command in the Bible is "Do not fear".

v.14: "Do not fear … do not be frightened."

It seems to be what God knows we most need to hear. Often those words are accompanied by these words from God

"For I am with you" or "I will be with you".

It is as if he is saying that the best antidote to fear we can have is his presence.

Peter is a great example of how that works in practice. We know from the gospels and the book of Acts that Peter had been a fear-filled coward who denied knowing Jesus the night before his crucifixion but then he became a bold ambassador for Christ, proclaiming what Jesus had done everywhere he could, to the point of eventually being martyred for his faith. What brought about that change? Meeting the risen Christ and being filled with his Spirit, realising that death could not hold Jesus and that death won't be the end for us either.

In the middle of whatever is causing us anxiety, fear or stress, we can invite him to draw close by his spirit and bring his peace, courage, hope, even joy into our hearts, however grim our external circumstances might be.

I think the time I experienced this most profoundly was during the last few days of my sister's life before she died of cancer. We had such precious times together reading Psalm 23 and imagining God gently leading her through the valley of the shadow of death into the light. Then during her funeral, despite the tragedy of seeing her two young children trying to come to terms with what had happened to their mother, I felt an extraordinary sense of joy rising up inside me which I think was God's spirit reassuring me that Emma was now safe with God and her struggles really were over.

We can each take some simple, practical steps to help us hold onto faith and not let fear take over:

1. Learn to pray before we panic
2. Develop a habit of meditating on and memorising scripture so we have it to hand when it is needed
3. Swallow our pride and ask the body of Christ to help - we belong to each other.

This week, I experienced that in practice.

Recently in our small group we have been memorising verses and this week's one is:

Matthew 11:28-30: Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me because I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

On Friday, I had set aside most of the day to finish writing this talk, then I had a call to say that my mother had fallen and broken her hip, and I landed up spending the day in hospital with her. My initial reaction was to panic about this talk, but I chose to let go of the panic and instead to trust God to help me make up the time I had lost.

When I came home from the hospital on Friday night, I was tired but strangely peaceful and then I found three messages on my phone – two from people in our small group each saying they were praying those Matthew 11 words over me and the third from someone not in that group who sent me a song to listen to with the same Matthew 11 words. It was as if God was speaking direct to my heart that he was lifting the burdens for me and giving me peace and rest.

There is one more thing from our passage today which I think will help us both in how we answer the question of why we have hope but also how we can handle suffering:

v.21-22: Peter talks about "the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

Jesus died a very real death, but he also rose from the dead.

He is Alive today!!

We don't worship a lifeless bit of stone, or a distant aloof God, or even a philosophy or theology.

We worship the risen Jesus who has gone before us into heaven, having conquered all the powers of darkness. This world is now going through the death throes of those powers and of sin itself. As the book of Revelation tells us

Rev 21: A day is coming when there will be no more sin, pain, crying, grief, death, when the old order of things – this current world – will have passed away.

Like Peter, we need to fix our eyes on Jesus in the place of awesome power where he is now seated and trust him that whatever this passing life throws at us, he will keep us safe for eternity. We need to learn to rest in our salvation, to stand on the foundation of what he has already done, rather than fighting in our own strength to gain it.

I think Peter is leaving each of us with three challenges to think about:

1. Are we each resting secure in what Jesus has already done for us to bring us to God or are we thinking there is something else we need to do? If anyone is not sure, please come to the front and talk/pray with any of us.

2. Assuming suffering will come to each of us at some point, rather than panicking and trying to run from it will we press in to know more of the presence of God in it?

3. Are there ways we can live more distinctively so that people will notice and want to know why we have the hope

that we do? All around us there are people who desperately need to know God – will they realise that we can help them to be found by him?

Some of us might be drawn to one of these challenges, others to two or three of them. Whichever of them we decide to make our own, let's all choose this week to stay alert and to make sure we are prepared for the opportunities God brings our way.