



### **Responding in a different spirit**

**Key passage: 1 Peter 2:19-25**

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It is always interesting to ask what a name means. One of the places I have visited on mission in South Sudan is Maridi – which was a very down-trodden city. Apart from the confusion over its location – on the border between two tribal groups who did not get on with each other – somehow it got a name which means “defeat”. And the people there, we discovered, were living out their name – they were depressed and had no self-worth.

I am named after a Scottish uncle, whose name “Donald” means “a proud chief”, and I come on my mother’s side from a clan whose motto (translated) means “He who hits me, gets two back”. Like everyone else, I am unable in my own strength to resist the pressure of “living out my name” – and I too often find myself wanting revenge, wanting to save face, wanting to hit out ... Maybe I should change my name – and continue to use the shortened version “Don”!

During the additional stress that we are experiencing during the coronavirus “lockdown”, unhealthy patterns of behaviour we can normally control can sometimes overwhelm us. This includes our response to provocation, where revenge – which we see all too often in the world around us – can lead us to actions we later regret. Children often resort to violence immediately when they are frustrated or provoked. Some nations pretend they need to have “an enemy” – and then respond to provocation with “excessive force”. Force and violence are too often accepted in society as a means of getting one’s own way. We can then easily begin to assume that the way of the world is the only way – we throw up our hands and apologise for doing what everyone else does. We say “We can’t help it ...”

Yet, in contrast to this, I believe in a Saviour who acted differently, and through his Spirit can help me follow his example. He shows us another way of responding to frustration, or overcoming violence.

Jesus is to Christians the supreme revelation of God. God has revealed himself gradually, so that there was time to assimilate what he was saying at one stage, before he revealed the next. For example, in the Old Testament: from Abraham we learn that God wants to have a personal relationship with us (Genesis 12:1ff); from the story of Moses we learn two things (at least!): that God is a God of history, a God of action; and that he is holy and majestic, intolerant of sin (Exodus 3:14). Then from prophets like Hosea and Micah we learn that God welcomes back those who have strayed, when they ask for forgiveness (Hosea 14:1ff; Micah 7:18ff); and from that eccentric prophet Ezekiel we learn that God through his Holy Spirit can actually change a person’s heart and life (Ezekiel 36:22f).

The Old Testament revelation of God reaches a climax in the later prophecies recorded in Isaiah, particularly in Chapter 53, where we read that God can use the sufferings of an innocent person to bring healing to the guilty.

These aspects of God’s personality reach their final revelation in Jesus Christ, who reveals to us the God who loves every individual, however much we have sinned, and who wants to make a relationship with each one of us. We

believe in the God who is Lord of creation – and Lord over the forces of evil in the world; a God who is holy, who will not tolerate sin (and yet welcomes those who come to him in repentance); and the God who can change a person's life, right from the heart – not just the external observances, but inward attitudes.

Just as the Old Testament revelation of God reached its climax in the amazing idea that God can use the suffering of an innocent person to bring healing to a guilty person, so the climax of the personification of God in Jesus Christ was to put this idea into action. It was the climax in Jesus' own mind, when he saw his destiny in going to death on the cross; and it was the climax in the minds of the early Christians, who came to realise that through this death, we have not only forgiveness of our sins, but a new example of how to respond to unjust treatment.

We can see this in verses 21-23 from the Epistle reading for today: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example ... 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." Peter is writing here about suffering – a real threat for his readers. This suffering was undeserved – it was merely because they were Christians. He points his readers to the supreme example of undeserved suffering – that of Jesus.

Peter cannot resist giving his readers a summary of the passion of Jesus Christ, and its effects. Jesus was sinless (v.22). No charge could be made against him with justice. He was totally innocent. Yet when he was brought before the courts (v.23), he made no effort to defend himself (see Matthew 27:14). When unfairly treated, he did not condemn his oppressors, nor invoke judgement on them. Instead, he "committed his cause to the one who judges justly" (v.23c, New English Bible). The word translated "committed his cause" is used three times in the Gospels to describe how Jesus was unjustly delivered up for punishment. Here the phrase is used to describe Jesus' own surrender of Himself to bear the penalty of sin – a voluntary act of obedience to the Father's will, for our sake. As v.24 puts it, "He himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree". Although there are in the New Testament a number of other pictures of what was happening at Calvary, we have a clear meaning here: Jesus was bearing in his own body the punishment for our sin, right through to the climax in his death on the Cross.

Peter gives us two results of the death of Jesus on the Cross. First "by his wounds you have been healed" (v.24). Note the past tense here – Peter is saying that even though their suffering is still present, they "have been healed". One of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century commentators, Theodore of Mopsuestia, says of this verse: "This is a new and strange method of healing: the doctor suffered the cost, and the sick received the healing".

The Greek word used here is used in NT in two ways. In a few places, it refers to the action of God in dealing with sin. Through the actions of Jesus here on earth, a victory was won in the heaven lies, as the power of sin and evil was broken. Throughout history men and women have discovered for themselves, as they turn to him in repentance and faith, that the death of Jesus brings us forgiveness for our sin, and gives us hope for eternity. But we cannot ignore the fact that the word translated "heal" is usually used to describe "cure" – in the sense of physical dis-ease. This was an essential aspect of Jesus' ministry.

Then, secondly (although it comes earlier) "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example ..." (v.21); "... that we might die to sins and live to righteousness" (v.24). As time goes on, the level of persecution of Christians will continue to increase. In the midst of this, we are called to follow the example of Christ, and "live for righteousness" – lives reflecting the glory of God, expecting no thanks, no reward from the world for this stance.

Persecution is happening more and more to Christians in our present time. It is sadly happening on a daily basis in countries where there are groups explicitly antagonistic to the Christian faith, and people are being killed because they are Christians. It is also happening in less overt ways in countries like our own, where the secular mentality has become deep-rooted, and Christians often experience mockery. (Having our churches closed during this present crisis may be understandable – but we need to make sure they are re-opened as places of welcome and peace as soon as possible.)

If we are to be faithful to our Lord, we will have to face a life of suffering. As Jesus said to His disciples in Matt 16: "Whoever would save his life will lose it". This is the way of "tough love" – following the example of Jesus. We must learn the secret of turning hatred into love. Jesus allowed all the hatred, all the anger, all our sin, to be dumped on him. He allowed them to enter his heart – but there, by the grace of the Holy Spirit of God, they were absorbed, to the extent that he was able to respond in a different spirit – of love for his accusers, and prayer for his tormentors.

We, as disciples of Jesus, are not called to bear the sins of others – that redemptive work is his alone. But we are called to allow the hatred and anger of others to enter our hearts, defended and controlled as they are by the blood of Christ, so that they can be replaced there with love and peace. This is not an easy lesson to learn – but it works! Anger is defused – because in this sort of encounter, if you duck low enough, there is nothing there to hit!