

Sunday 21st of February 2021 1st Sunday of Lent.

Readings:

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

Sermon:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

It has been my choice to talk about our first reading today because its central message is so important for our faith in God. The central message of this text might be rather clear, but the details can be very confusing.

Even Martin Luther says about this text that this is perhaps the most obscure passage in the New Testament and he admits that he does not know for certain just what Peter exactly means. Also other scholars admit that a lot of words in this text can have different meanings. In general they all agree that the overall meaning is: ***Since Christ bore witness through His suffering on the cross and was vindicated, we, too, can bear witness through suffering and trust God to vindicate us.***

A true message of hope for all of us.

How do they come to this conclusion? How can we come to this conclusion?

First of all: who is Peter talking to? Peter is talking to new Christians in the first century, somewhere in the fifties and sixties of the first century. Christians, as were the Jews, were suffering through persecution. Mind you, both Peter and Paul were executed in this time in Rome. So it wasn't easy in those days to be a Christian. It was down right dangerous! And people were asking themselves why they were staying Christians if it was so dangerous. What was the good in that? Peter explains that there is good in that suffering. If you suffer for Christ, if you suffer for being a witness of Christ's Gospel, that will not go unrewarded.

And Peter comes up with two big examples; first of all Christ himself. Christ suffered for our sins, once for all (which means: he suffered for the sins of all people, alive, dead and in the future). The righteous, Christ, suffered for the unrighteous, mankind, in order to bring them nearer to God. Peter compares that to his contemporaries suffering unjustly under persecution. Christ was vindicated by God in his resurrection and ascension for being a witness on the cross; so can the persecuted trust God to vindicate them for their unjust suffering.

Christ suffered because he was a faithful witness to God's message in a hostile world; so were the persecuted challenged to be faithful witnesses despite all the hostility and danger in their time.

The second example that Peter gives is the example of Noah. Noah was faithful to God although the whole world was against God. Noah was rewarded for his faithfulness. What goes for Christ and Noah, goes for the persecuted people in the first century, and what goes for them can go for us. If we stay faithful to God's word, if we proclaim the Gospel in a hostile world, God will vindicate us; it will not go unrewarded.

And the example of Noah is elaborated on: the flood in Noah's story, that is cleansing the world, is prefiguring our baptism. Not that baptism is cleaning dirt of our bodies, but it is a promise of God to give us a good conscience, the right attitude; it symbolizes our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter calls upon all of us to be witnesses of the Gospel in a world that is not always welcoming to this message; we get opposition, we even get persecution or people that ridicule us for our beliefs. But still we are asked to persevere, to be witnesses of the Gospel. And by being baptised we show to the world where we stand. Our baptism symbolizes our faith in the resurrection; it is a public confession to our faith, even if that means that we have to go against a hostile world.

And we have to show that in our daily life. We have to tell people about our faith, we have to explain to people who Jesus is, who God is, what their message is. But not only do we have to talk about our faith, we have to live our faith. Our deeds have to prove to everyone what we believe. And we have to be firm in that. Even if we are the only one who stands for Christ and the Gospel, we have to persevere. We have to go for it, even if that feels like persecution, even when people really come after you.

Peter tells us to bear witness in two ways of suffering: through confessing our baptism and in holy living. Proclaim your faith and live your faith; talk about it and do it. And for doing this we will not go unrewarded. Christ went through extreme suffering; he gave his life for his friends, the biggest love possible. And for that God raised him from the dead and let him come to heaven to sit at his right hand with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him.

Noah was ridiculed by his contemporaries, but he built the ark over many years and was faithful to God. And God saved him and his family.

In these examples God made it clear to us that we will be vindicated as well if we witness the Gospel to the world through our baptism and in our holy living: proclaim the Gospel out loud and bring it to the end of the world and show it in our own way of living. As it says in Acts: people were amazed about the love they had for one another and the world.

So being a Christian will not always be easy; it can even mean suffering; but we will not go unrewarded. as Christ was vindicated for his suffering on the cross, so will we be vindicated for our suffering.

What will that be? How will we be vindicated?

In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, Paul tells us that our views now are blurred but then will be clear, we will see God face to face; we will really know God and share with him a place in the Kingdom. That's his promise.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you provide for us always; you give us hope for a better life in this world and beyond. We thank you that we can know you through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives with you and your Holy Spirit. Amen.