

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Suffering like Christ

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Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011

John 10:1-11  
1 Peter 2:18-25

When you were at school were you drilled in the correct use of metaphor in your writing and told that it is a sign of weak argument to mix your metaphors? Your cat couldn't be as lithe as a tiger and as sleepy as a dormouse. Your ideas couldn't both percolate and sprout.

Jesus mixed his metaphors in this passage about good shepherds and protected sheep. He describes himself as both shepherd and gate. He talks of the thieves and bandits as both trying to enter by climbing the walls of the sheep-fold and as standing at the door and trying to call the sheep out. We usually mix our metaphors when we are trying this way and that to get a point across. The point Jesus is making is that he is safety for his followers. The sheep-fold (or sheep fank as we call it in this part of the world) is a place of safety. And the good shepherd is the safe person to follow.

This is immensely reassuring. After all we know that we live in an unsafe world. we know that it is hard to know whom to trust. When you came to vote at the election last week, if you were one of those who took the pencil in your hand, looked at the list, and wondered who would really keep their promises, you wouldn't have been alone. We live in an age of distrust. But it is safe to trust Jesus, the good shepherd, and safe to follow where he leads and live as he tells us.

This doesn't mean that if we follow Jesus and sincerely try, with God's help to live in his way of love and self-giving, we will never encounter opposition. There are and will be distractions and those who will try to entice us away, or even try to force us to cease following, but they should not be heeded, however they come. Jesus assumes that his sheep, his followers, will be able to recognise him, know his ways, and follow him. He does not seem to think that we will be easily misled by false ways. The Holy Spirit within us and our own common-sense and intelligence will show us whether any proposed course of action is in line with what Jesus wants for us and from us. I find this immensely reassuring as I prepare to go away to the General Assembly next week, when all sorts of decisions about the future and shape of the church must be taken. Jesus assumes that we will not be easily led astray from his way and his will. This passage from John's gospel is one designed to give us encouragement.

The consequence of our following Jesus, despite any opposition, despite any who oppose us is the delight of the fullness of life which Christ brings us. And who could ask for more than that?

And yet. Have you ever read a passage of Scripture, been immensely encouraged by it, delighted in its great truth, but still wanted to say "Yes, but..."? There is a "yes but" which comes to thinking people when faced with the promise that within God's flock is the safe place to be and that Jesus is the safe person to follow. Yes, that is true, I find it to be true. **But**, what about the suffering that comes into our lives? What about my own measure of pain and worry and fear? What about the suffering, often on a much grander scale, which I see affect Christian people across the world? "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Yes, great, but..?

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That is the answer to the but. Jesus too knows about suffering. He leads us, even, as Psalm 23 says, when we go through the valley of the shadow

of death.

All over the country today is being marked as the beginning of Christian Aid week. All sorts of events will be taking place this week, from the faithful door-to-door collecting, to the huge book sale in Edinburgh, to sponsored walks and other events; all to raise money to go towards the church's work in caring for the poor, in preventing poverty, in calling governments to account, in responding to emergency situations and seeking to prevent emergencies arising. We will have our chance to give to Christian Aid at our June communion service, but even without a local focus, this is a week when you will be aware of the charity, which is our charity: the churches' arm and agency for seeking to help.

There would be no need for such organised work if there were not injustice and suffering in the world. But there is. We see it on our news screens daily: people attacked in Libya, in Syria; people living in temporary shelter in Pakistan, in Haiti; people who live on unmanageably low pay in Africa, in India. There always has been poverty and suffering - didn't Jesus say that the poor we have with us always? - but that doesn't mean that we should shrug our shoulders and say that it is none of our business. Human suffering is always our business, because, in different measure, perhaps, we too know what it is to suffer.

Peter's readers knew. Peter is writing to a Church, a group of Christians, and he is writing about how what we believe about Jesus should play out in our lives. He is writing about what it means to follow the good shepherd. He has pointed out that as Christians we are a holy nation - a people apart, and that the consequence of that should not be that we hold ourselves aloof from the world we live in, but that we should live in the world with honour, accepting authority and living right even when accused - falsely accused - of doing what is wrong. It was common in early Christian letters to write specific instructions to different groups within the Christian community: husbands, wives, children, slaves - and usually in that order. But Peter turns the order on its head. He speaks to the slaves first.

Slavery was a part of life in the Roman empire, and much as it might be deplored, there was no point in writing to the church as though the condition of being a slave was not known to some of the faithful. That was their reality.

Peter speaks to them first because being part of God's holy nation turns expectations on their heads. Peter has put them first in this, his household list - before the more usual husbands, wives and children, and he has not added any admonition to masters - because in God's household God is the master and the usual order of things is overturned, with his servants having the highest place. Peter has also put them first because what they experience every day - suffering and being punished for faults that are not theirs - is also the experience of the entire audience of this letter. We see that when we read that they have to suffer various trials, 1:6-7, or that they are all to conduct themselves honourably among the Gentiles, even though they are maligned as evildoers, 2:12. All of us at times feel that we suffer unjustly.

Moreover Peter does not use the usual word *doulos* to refer to slaves, but the more specific *oiketai*, household slave. Given that he has so much to say about the household of God, this can be no accident. The slaves now stand as paradigms for the way that all of God's household should react and behave.

How often do I hear someone comment on the illness of another "Poor soul, he doesn't deserve this." How often does the children's cry of "It's not fair!" come to your lips, even if you have the forbearance and maturity not always to give it voice? And if we know something of the injustice of life, how much more do those who have their lives and livelihoods dictated to them by the demands of powerful richer nations, or the circumstance of living under dictatorship, or by finding

themselves living in what has become a war-zone?

But we are not children of the world, to rail against injustice, and deem ourselves justified at taking revenge on those even less powerful than ourselves. We are citizens of God's holy nation, living in the light of Christ's death and resurrection. If there is injustice and suffering going on, there is only one place where that will point us: to Christ on the cross. We are pointed to the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

Jesus' suffering was completely unjust in worldly terms, and it was real and it was all-encompassing. He suffered in body, dreadfully. And he suffered in mind and spirit, knowing the betrayal and desertion of his friends, and feeling himself even cut off from his heavenly Father. It was unjust but it was not pointless: it was his suffering which freed us from sin to live by his standards of righteousness. There was great point to Jesus' sufferings, and we are the beneficiaries. Because of his suffering we are kept safe, no matter what happens to us in our lives in this world. Because of his unmerited suffering we can continue to know God's love in the worst of trouble, and to know that beyond this world there is security waiting for us.

And when we are asked to go through the darkest valley as we follow our shepherd, we can know, even as Peter told his readers, that any suffering we do not deserve, any accusations or opposition that we face, if calmly accepted, are also not without their point. They win us God's approval, and they enable us to give a witness, even as Jesus himself did, when he did not return abuse when he was abused. Unmerited suffering, calmly borne with patience and faith, bears witness to the saviour who set us an example.

This is not to romanticize the brutal effects of human slavery. The suffering that these slaves endured was real, as is any unjust suffering today. In giving those who suffer unjustly a paradigm of Christ's suffering, Peter is not approving the fact of humans inflicting pain on each other. But reflecting on unjust accusation and suffering leads him to reflect on the suffering of Christ, for wrong which he did not do, but we did. His suffering was real, though of beneficial effect. The effect is to bring us to the place of safety seen in the Psalm and the Gospel.

Jesus went through with all that was laid before him, because he wanted to help us. We too go through with what lies before us so that we can help others. Accepting your own unmerited suffering does not mean that you accept it for others. As Christians we are called to put ourselves out, to take on discomfort and even pain for the sake of others. That is what this Christian Aid week is about. We give, and give sacrificially, we ask others to give, so that those who through no fault of their own live in stress and pain and poverty may know relief. Putting ourselves out for others, taking on discomfort that others may be saved and comforted, this is a very Christian thing to do: "Because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." (1Peter 2:21)

Amen.