

Witness and Service

Series: Strangers and Neighbours: Learning to Be Christian in a Post Christian World from 1 Peter

Date: 11 September 2022, 13th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: 1 Peter 3:8-4:11; Psalm 36; Luke 24:44-49

We've been studying the apostle Peter's first letter. It was written to Christians scattered across what is modern day Turkey to teach them about how to be Christians in a society that was hostile to the Christian faith. We live in a society where Christianity and the church used to have cultural and social power but today is increasingly indifferent and at times hostile to Christianity. We're studying this letter to help us learn how to be Christians in a Post-Christian world. Early in this sermon series I suggested that living in a post Christian society means that we're all public Christians now. We're called to be a counter cultural community for the common good. As we live out the Bible's teaching on sex and family, wealth and possessions, racial identity and power, we will look very different from the society around us. We will stick out, but doing good means that our neighbours must see us sacrificially pouring out our time and wealth for the common good. In a post Christian society, all Christians are on mission in every area of our lives. This is not just something professional Christians like ministers and missionaries do. It's for all of us. Mission means that we need to be prepared to bear witness to Christ with our words in our web of relationships. It means we're to do justice and love our neighbours. And it means we need to integrate our faith with our work so that we can engage culture with our vocations. Peter has incredibly helpful teaching for us in the area of witness, and also how we can build a strong church community to support us as we're sent out to be public disciples. We're going to look at those two themes under the headings of Witness in 3.13-18 and Service in 4.7-11. Let's take each in turn.

Before we get into these, let me say whether you're a Christian or not there has perhaps been no better exemplar of the themes of Christian witness and service than her late Majesty the Queen. In her Christmas message in 2000 she said,

"For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life. I, like so many of you, have drawn great comfort in difficult times from Christ's words and example." It's my prayer that like her majesty the teaching of Christ would provide the framework for our lives.

Witness 3:13-18

When Christianity is in the media these days it's usually for one of two things. Either institutional or leadership failure. Bishop Richard is going to speak about the topic of leadership in the church next week from 1 Peter 5. Second, how Christian morality is at odds with secular society. What about gay marriage? Slavery, Racism, Women etc. I've had conversations where when people find out I'm a priest they immediately ask me a spikey question and it feels like the wrong answer will end the relationship before it's even begun. If that's the case for me, my guess is that you might find it much

harder. My sense is that many, if not most of us, don't know where to start with these objections. Peter's words speak to the situation we find ourselves in. Have a read with me.

'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.' **15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. 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, **16** keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

I just want to make 4 comments about these verses then give some practical tips.

(1) Peter says, ***don't be afraid***. Why? Because Christ is Lord. He's the one who is in control. He's the one who holds your future in his hands. Not your friend, your neighbour, your boss, what you see in the newspaper or on social media. It can be so easy to find ourselves afraid about what others think about us. But God's existence and Christ's work of salvation is not dependent upon how well you answer questions and objections. Therefore you don't need to be defensive. We can rest secure in him.

(2) Peter expects that we will ***live lives that are worth questioning***. Notice again that Peter refers to our "good behaviour". In the midst of a world of anxiety, darkness, despair, polarisation, conflict, moral decay and so on, we can shine as beacons of hope as we simply live out the lives God calls us to, lives of humility, generosity, integrity and joy. I remember seeing this with Cynthia from our 8am service after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She met it with a quiet confidence that came from her hope in Christ that was an incredible witness to her family and friends.

(3) Not everyone has the gift of evangelism. But Peter expects that every Christian will, ***Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone*** who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Peter says be prepared to answer people's questions. And what are those questions about? The hope that we have in Jesus. Not every question. Goodness knows that that's a long list, and my experience is that the longer I go as a Christian, the more questions I have! No, the questions Peter has in mind are about our hope in Jesus.

(4) We're to answer people with ***gentleness and respect***. Who we are and how we treat people is just as important as what we say. We're called to speak the truth in love. This is particularly important for discussions on social media. Our society increasingly acts like if you love someone you have to agree with all that they say and do, and that if you disagree then you hate them. This is simply a failure of moral imagination. We can be people who demonstrate the art of respectful and gracious disagreement. Key to gentleness and respect and an answer that will be heard is listening well. Just to listen to people, to ask questions, to demonstrate that we care about them and not winning an argument, is a great gift.

So the question is, are you prepared to give a reason for the hope that you have? Can you say what your hope in Jesus is? Why do you hope in him? What has he done for you? Why do you trust him? If you don't feel prepared, well, today is the day to start preparation!

You could start with Peter's summary in 3:18: *Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.* Or here's Queen Elizabeth again.

"History teaches us that we need saving from ourselves. From our recklessness or greed. God sent into the world ... neither a philosopher or a general ... but a saviour with the power to forgive. That's what Jesus has done. We were unrighteous. He is righteous. He died for our sins, to bring us to God.

The first step to being prepared to give a reason for your hope is to know about that hope for yourself. This is why we have sermons at church, to teach you about the hope we have in Jesus. This is what our Bible Study Groups are for where we can work it out together. This is one reason why I would encourage you to read the Bible each day.¹ It's what the church library is for: So you can read good books that teach about our hope. And this is why I hope to run The Ripple Effect in our Bible Study groups in term 4. This is a short course going over the basics of the Christian faith and how to have conversations about them.

The art of conversation

Speaking of which, let me just give a few tips on how to have conversations where you can give something of a spiritual answer. If you think about any conversation there are two levels going on: what is said, and what's in your head. The cycle of a conversation goes something like this. You say something. I listen. I think of a response. I say the response. You listen. You respond.

Now, how do we inject the good news of Jesus into a conversation? You say something, maybe about a movie you've seen, or something you read in the paper. As I'm listening I'm thinking, "what part of the gospel story does this touch on?" Does it speak to say, the doctrine of creation, or the fall, or Jesus as the revealer of God, the reconciler of humanity to God, the example to follow, or the gift of the Spirit or the day of judgement and the new creation? Of course the more you know the gospel story, the better you'll be able to make the connection. But you could start, say, with the creed. It's a great summary. Having found a point of connection you then formulate a response that takes the conversation forward. That may be a question or a comment or a story. It can be about ideas, or feelings or experiences. Good questions that show you're listening to the other person and that you're interested in them. The goal with your response is to first, show that you love them and second, interest the other person in the things of God. Or as Paul says in Colossians - "Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt."² So for example: "You mentioned climate change. It makes me think how in the creation story in the Bible, God gives humanity the job of taking care of the earth. It makes me sad how bad a job we've done."

¹ Cf. Romans 15.4: "For everything that was written ... was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."

² Colossians 4.6

What do you need to do to get more prepared to answer people? Why not practice having spiritual conversations using the model we've looked at in your Bible study groups, or with Christian friends and family? And in all this pray! Because ultimately it's God who is at work to open eyes that are blind and to soften hearts that are hard.

Service 4:7-11

I've suggested that as Christians we are public disciples whether we like it or not. Being public can feel isolating and exposed. But we're not made to fly solo. We're made to be in community. We all need a strong community with rich relationships to support us as we're sent out to be salt and light in the world. That is what church is all about. Peter has some excellent advice on how we can build this kind of church. Read with me 4:7-11

7 The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. **8** Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. **9** Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. **10** Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. **11** If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen

I just want to make 3 brief points and then finish with exploring service a little more deeply.

- (1) *Be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.* It is easy to fall asleep at the wheel and just let the culture carry you along. The worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth, the desire for other things can make spiritually drowsy. Peter says, "Stay awake!" Why? So you can pray. Prayer is the most basic and intimate aspect of our spiritual lives. Make it your top priority! This is how we can stay spiritually vibrant as a community.
- (2) *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.* Our society is fast forgetting grace and forgiveness. We as the church should be marked by love and forgiveness. We need it when we stuff up. Others need our love. Our neighbours need us to be a community of grace.
- (3) *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* This is so counter-cultural in Australia. We entertain, which is about performance. And then it's only for people we know. But hospitality is about welcoming the stranger and inviting them in. The new migrants at church have lots to teach us about this. Hospitality breaks down barriers and builds friendships. Let's keep working on that as a church. Who can you share a cuppa or a meal with?

(4) Here's our second key verse for today, verse 10: *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.*

You want to know how God builds the church? You want to know how we can build strong community? This is how. By each of us serving. This is the picture of the body of Christ in Romans, 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. The body grows as each member serves with the gifts God has given them.

Whatever gifts you have - your abilities, your time, your money, your personality, your education, your house, your car, your smartphone, all that you are and all that you have, first and foremost belongs to God. These are things you have received from him. And you are God's steward. You hold them in trust for him, to be used for his purposes. What does Peter say? You use these gifts to serve others. Yes you have to care for yourself, and we all need a weekly sabbath and seasons of rest, but even then that is so you can be ready to serve. So how are you going to serve?

Many of you do so in all kinds of amazing ways. But for some of you this may be a new idea. I'm convinced that we learn how to use the gifts God has given us by serving in church. My hope is that everyone at church can ask themselves these 3 questions:

- What are the needs?
- What am I good at? or What do I enjoy?
- What is my availability?

When those line up, then get serving in that area. After our next song we're going to have leaders of different ministries at church share what they do and how this helps the church grow. And you'll have a chance to sign up in the Parish Room after the service. If you're not currently serving in some way, have a think what you might be able to do.

Now, It's ok to have a go and fail. Failure is a great teacher. Either you get better and discover a gift. Or you learn your weakness, and so know more about yourself for serving in the future.

In Acts 20.35 Jesus says, *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* As we close I want to explore why that is the case to encourage you to serve and in your serving. Here are some of the blessings of giving in service: Through your service the church grows. The needs of others are met. You build relationships with others at church as you serve together. Through serving, your eyes lift from yourself and your problems. You don't think less of yourself, but you think of yourself less. Through serving you grow in character and Christlikeness - because he came not to be served but to serve. Through serving you get to see more of what God is doing in the world. Through serving you experience the Holy Spirit at work - in others and even in yourself, because he delights to use ordinary people like you and me.

What do you need to do to get prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you?

How can you serve, as a faithful steward, with the gifts God has given you?