

## **Sharing in Christ's Sufferings** by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2026  
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Readings: Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-5:14

### **In the in-between time**

We are in an in-between time – between Ascension Day, which was on Thursday, and Pentecost, which is next Sunday. In our reading from Acts we heard the story of Jesus' commission to the apostles to be his witnesses, his promise of the Holy Spirit, his ascension into heaven, and what the apostles did next – spending time together with the other believers praying in anticipation of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

There are two horizons in this passage: the immediate horizon of waiting for the Spirit, and the bigger horizon of waiting for Christ to come again as judge, as the angels promise the apostles:

This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.<sup>1</sup>

So what does all this mean for us?

The mission that Jesus entrusted to his apostles is the mission of the Church, and so it is the mission of all of us. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commands the apostles to make disciples. Here in Acts, he says that they will be his witnesses. If we are followers of Jesus, or disciples, we share in this mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:11 NRSV

There is a lost and broken world all around us that desperately needs to know the love and the healing of God. Who is going to bring that to them if not us? While we wait for the final coming of Christ to bring, peace, justice and restoration to all things, there is work to be done.

## **Witnesses**

What does it mean to be a witness? A witness is someone who has an experience and is willing to speak about it. We most commonly use the word in the context of a court of law. But the same principle holds true for us as Christians. If we have experienced the love of God for ourselves, we have something to share. We don't need to be experts in theology, or to have all the answers. We just need to be open about the fact that we follow Christ, and willing to share unashamedly the difference that he has made in our lives.

If you think that is a bit of a challenge, think what it must be like for Christians who face persecution in other parts of the world. In fact the Greek word used for witnesses in the New Testament is *martures*, from which we get the word martyr. The martyrs of the Christian faith are those who are willing to stand up for what they believe even to the point of suffering and death. And their witness down the centuries has strengthened and emboldened their fellow-believers, and been an catalyst for growth. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church".

## **The letter of Peter**

At the licensing service two weeks ago, Bishop Jane spoke about the first letter of Peter, which was written to churches in what we would now call western Turkey, who were facing

various kinds of suffering. Peter reminds them (and us) that to suffer is to follow in the steps of Jesus. Let me quote some of the phrases that Peter writes earlier in the letter. Jesus was “the stone that the builders rejected”<sup>2</sup>; “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps”<sup>3</sup>. “He himself bore our sins in his own body on the cross”<sup>4</sup>, and “Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God”<sup>5</sup>. Peter is writing to Christians who “have had to suffer various trials”<sup>6</sup>. In chapters 2 Peter addresses the situation of slaves who may be unjustly beaten<sup>7</sup>, and in chapter 3 he writes of Christians being maligned and abused, suffering for doing right and being called to account for their faith<sup>8</sup>.

And now, in chapter 4 he tells his hearers, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you”<sup>9</sup>. We don’t know precisely what he was referring to, but it looks like being a Christian doesn’t magically protect you from having a hard time, and may even bring it on. Discipleship is not for the faint-hearted!

Well, if you haven’t switched off yet, well done, because it gets better from here.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:7

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 2:21

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 3:18

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 1:6

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 2:19f

<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 3:13-17

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 4:12

## Facing suffering with hope

Peter doesn't try to tiptoe round the reality of suffering, or pretend it isn't a real experience. In fact, thinking that you're entitled to a trouble-free ride through life is self-delusion. Our bodies are designed to feel pain so that we know to avoid harm. There is no love without the risk of hurt. No one achieves success without experiencing failures on the way. And standing up for what is right is never going to be a walk in the park when there are others who have a vested interest in maintaining exploitation and injustice. Sometimes life is going to be tough. That's not an unfortunate aberration, it's normal, so we might as well get used to it.

But Peter helps us to see the challenges of life in a bigger context: God loves us and has called us to be his own; in chapter 1 Peter reminds us that Jesus died for us and rose again, conquering death and guaranteeing for us "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."<sup>10</sup> What's the worst that could happen to you? Death? God's got that covered. Even dying is the gateway to glory. The American missionary Jim Elliott, who was killed while trying to bring the gospel to a remote tribe in Ecuador, left behind this quote:

*'He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.'*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 1:4-5

<sup>11</sup> Jim Elliott's story is told by his wife, Elizabeth Elliott in *Through Gates of Splendour*

As Christians, we should ask ourselves, where does our real identity lie? And where is our security? The key to knowing yourself and loving yourself is to know the one who created you. And the key to true security is to trust that God will look after you.

Peter is writing to people who were very likely to suffer merely because they were Christians. There are millions around the world today who are in just that position, especially Christians who are in countries where there is a hostile ideology, such as extremist Islam in Iran or Pakistan, for example, or Communism in China or North Korea. Peter reminds his hearers that “your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering”.<sup>12</sup> We should be mindful of them in prayer. And perhaps their suffering will put ours in some kind of perspective. These people, who suffer because they belong to Christ, are indeed those who “share in Christ’s sufferings”.<sup>13</sup> They have reason to rejoice, says Peter, because “the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.”<sup>14</sup> Those who suffer for their faith should see it not as a disgrace, which is how their enemies see it, but as a badge of honour, a privilege to be called a Christian.

### **Humility and trust**

There is helpful advice for all of us in Peter’s letter. One really important thing, says Peter, is to have an attitude of humility. There is nothing that debunks an over-inflated view of ourselves than a bit of suffering. But we needn’t wait until

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Peter 5:9

<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 5:13

<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 5:14

disaster cuts us down to size. Peter tells us to clothe ourselves with humility and to humble ourselves “under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.”<sup>15</sup> Peter’s words echo the teaching of Jesus that “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted”.<sup>16</sup> Having a realistic view of yourself (and I don’t mean putting yourself down) is the key to maintaining good relationships with others and with God.

This God who has a mighty hand is our loving heavenly Father, and we can trust him implicitly. To those who are suffering, Peter promises that “after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you”.<sup>17</sup> If God has had his eye on us from before the foundation of the world, and has called us to share his eternal glory, and has given us his Spirit, isn’t he worth trusting? So here comes one of my favourite memory verses:

“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”<sup>18</sup>

It’s a sentiment echoed in that popular hymn “What a friend we have in Jesus”, where the repeated refrain is “take it to the Lord in prayer”.

We all experience anxiety from time to time, often with good reason. But instead of letting it eat away at us, we can do something positive about it: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” Take it to the Lord in prayer.

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Peter 5:5-6

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 23:12

<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 5:10

<sup>18</sup> 1 Peter 5:7

Nurturing our relationship with God day by day is a sure way of helping us grow closer to him and developing our sense of trust. That growing relationship with him will equip us to face whatever life may throw at us.

Another thing we can do is to ask others to pray for us. We're in this together. God never intended us to live the Christian life on our own. We have brothers and sisters in Christ. We can bear one another's burdens<sup>19</sup>. Even if we can't visit someone in person, we can phone, text, or write. Perhaps we won't literally follow Peter's closing instruction to "greet one another with a kiss of love", but we can certainly support and encourage one another.

### **Running over**

We may not be able to control many of the things that happen to us, good or bad, but we can choose how we respond to them. As you look at your life, is your glass half full or half empty? It's the same glass, whichever description you use. Do you count your blessings, or bewail the things you are not happy with?

Peter's message is that when we know the Lord, when we understand what Jesus Christ has done for us in his death and resurrection, when we have come to entrust our lives to God our loving Father and mighty protector, our cup will be not half empty but running over. And that won't depend on external circumstances, which can change unpredictably, but on the love and security which our relationship with God brings.

Let us pray.

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<sup>19</sup> Galatians 6:2

You might like to ask yourself, Where is my identity? Where is my security? Do they lie in knowing God as my heavenly Father?

(silence)

I'm going to use the words of a well-known hymn as a prayer, asking God to help us centre our lives on him.

*Father, hear the prayer we offer,  
Not for ease that prayer shall be,  
But for strength that we may ever  
Live our lives courageously.*

*Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
In our wanderings be our guide.  
Through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be thou at our side.<sup>20</sup>*

Amen.

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<sup>20</sup> Hymn by Love Maria Whitcomb Willis, 1859