

Easter 7 A

This letter of First Peter was written between 90 and 100 AD, perhaps from Rome, where the church was coming together in some new way.

By the time the letter was written, the eyewitnesses to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus were long dead but the church had figured out, had been led by the Spirit, to a new life in the power of the Spirit.

Earlier, after the Ascension, some had wondered how to go on without Jesus' persistent presence and guidance, but the Spirit had showed them the way.

The Spirit was not one that possessed, not one that put them on an automatic mode in which no mistakes were made.

No, the Spirit led them as human beings blessed with power and choice, maybe even freedom, and so there were some ups and downs in the life of the early church.

A most significant development was that by 90 AD, the diverse branches of the first church were being drawn together.

Some had followed Peter after the Ascension, as an inheritor of the authority of Christ; others heard of Christ through Paul.

By 90, both were fairly long dead and those who had found Christ through them had to come together.

Rome, where this letter may have been written, was the place where Peter and Paul had died at the hands of the Romans, where the new life of the church would be centered.

The bad news was that as the church figured out how to live, after the Ascension, after the death of the founding generation, and in the power of the Spirit, at the same moment the powers of the world were beginning to take it seriously and to consider destroying it.

A Roman governor here and there found the Christians annoying and then disruptive and then called them traitors to the Emperor and a danger to society.

Nero, Domitian and other emperors rounded them up, tortured and interrogated them, and executed them for their love of Christ and their allegiance to his kingdom.

They told the emperors that Christ and his Kingdom meant more to them than the Empire, and so the Empire sought to eliminate them. N

o sooner had they adjusted to their new place in history then the forces of the Empire arrayed against them and made it awfully hard to follow Jesus.

This was nothing to be shocked about, Peter (actually a later leader claiming his name) said.

“Beloved, 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.”

Throughout the Gospels, we can hear Jesus preparing his disciples for persecution and difficulty, for rejection.

The taking up of suffering, the carrying of a cross, the world's rejection all are promised to those who follow Jesus.

Great forces will be arrayed against you, said Jesus.

You may lose your earthly life to them but will gain the kingdom and an eternal life.

“Insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings...you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.”

If the road is hard, that means it is the same one Christ walked and that is good news, that we are headed the right direction.

And so the Christians who suffer in Egypt and other places are the martyrs of the present day, sharing fully in the work of Jesus.

But what if the road is not hard?

What if there seems to be no fiery ideal?

What if the government gives your church a special status that allows you to deduct your contributions to it?

What if the government, your empire, allows your ministers an effective lower tax rate through a parsonage allowance?

What if you live in one of the regions of the country in which church membership is still a presumption and in which the Gospel is intertwined with respectability?

What persecution do we face?

Surely, we should not wish for violence and oppression to be directed toward us, to mark us as authentic followers of Christ?

So a different question needs to be asked.

The government is indifferent to the Christian movement; it is not our biggest problem.

So what is it, these days, in our lives, that restrains our life in Christ?

What prevents us from being more fully and publicly Jesus' disciples?

What, like the persecution of the Empire of old, drives us behind closed doors and saps the energy of our faith?

The myriad choices of life in a wildly affluent society are one problem.

Today, you might have assembled as the Body of Christ for worship or:

Driven to Greenville for a fabulous brunch

Spent the weekend at the beach or the mountains

Slept in and watched something on Netflix

Fished or boated at Lake Greenwood

Or worked on your house and garden, after a trip to Lowe's

All of which would have weakened our assembly and been a loss to the Body of Christ in this place.

Lovely choices of fine things to do make it harder for us to claim our life in Christ.

Our capacity to fashion ourselves and engage in self-creation may make it harder to receive the givens of life in Christ, which do not come in every color, size, and price point imaginable.

When you seek to describe yourself, how many other identities are offered?

You are certain kind of worker, the fan of a certain team, a Democrat or Republican, preppy, crunchy, techy, all of which may be more important or obvious than Christian identity in a world like ours.

The simple fact of our anxious busyness may be the greatest oppressor of a fuller life in Christ. We spend less time in prayer because we spend too much time running to and fro. Our capacity for contemplation is weakened by our restless ambition. Our fear of missing out leads us to engage in more and more, and we forget the voice of the one who says he wants all of our attention and who sometimes receives precious little.

The ordeal of our life in Christ is not fiery and persecutory, as it was in 90 AD in Rome, where this let might have been written.

We will not be arrested in worship by some centurion and marched to the Forum for condemnation.

Our ordeal is a failure of imagination and discipline, an inability to dwell in Christ and allow him to shape all the rest of our lives.

Our ordeal is our own inattention, our diffused and worldly faith.

We are our own persecutors these days; as Pogo said to Porkypine: We have met the enemy, and he is us.

If a lot has changed between 90 and 2017 AD, the prescription to get us out of this mess has not. Peter writes: Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And 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.

A new turn to Christ, in humility and trust, is all that is called for, then and now.