Celebrating Easter with Peter the Apostle

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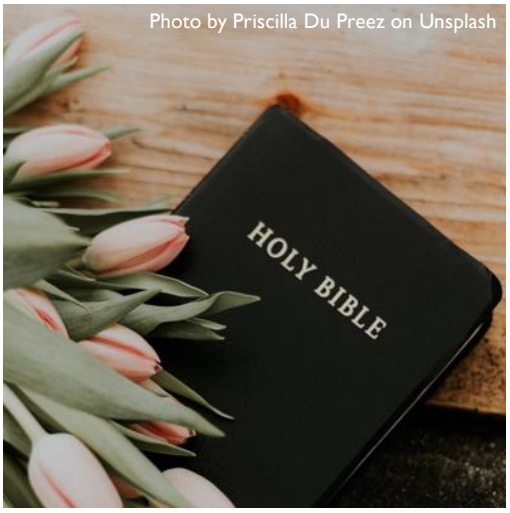
Our Sunday second readings this Easter are taken from 1 Peter, a letter written to give encouragement to people in exile. Peter Edmonds SJ guides us through the verses that will be read at Mass in the coming weeks so that we might hear in them, and in the rest of the letter, the voice of the God Who Speaks during our own time of exile. We, like the letter's first hearers, are 'a people living between the resurrection of Christ and his return in glory.'

At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, we read how the Risen Jesus spent the forty days between his resurrection and ascension appearing to his apostles, 'speaking of the kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3). We believe that this Lord Jesus speaks to us, too, about the kingdom of God through the readings we hear on Sundays during the forty days between Easter and Ascension and the days that lead up to Pentecost.



The pattern of scripture readings in these weeks differs from the familiar pattern of the rest of the year. In this Easter season:

- The first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles rather than the Old Testament; a different selection is offered for each year of the three-year cycle.
- The gospel reading (with the exceptions of the third Sundays of Easter in Years A and B, when we hear from Luke) is from John's Gospel. On each fourth Sunday, we hear selections from John 10, the 'good shepherd' chapter, and on the remaining Sundays, we listen to Jesus's discourse at the Last Supper (John 13-17).
- For our second reading, in Year A we concentrate on the First Letter of Peter, in Year B on the First Letter of John, and in Year C on the Book of Revelation.

The risen Jesus is in all of these readings, but otherwise there is no obvious link between each Sunday's three readings.

Reading 1 Peter, we join 'the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia' in attending to the voice of 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ'. His letter is divided into five chapters consisting of 105 verses. In a typical Bible, they take up just over four pages. These pages were written to be read aloud to a worshipping congregation. In our liturgies, we hear just 35 verses over six short extracts, so we might like to read the whole letter for ourselves during the six weeks between Easter and Pentecost.

This letter is addressed to Christians living in regions remote from the Palestine of Jesus and of Peter. At the first Christian Pentecost, Luke informs us that people from Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia were present in Jerusalem (Acts 2:9). Reading through the letter, we might ex-

pect its readers to have a Jewish background if they were to appreciate its many references, implicit and explicit, to the Hebrew scriptures, but descriptions of the life these converts used to live, 'futile ways inherited from your ancestors', suggest a non-Jewish background (1 Peter 1:18).

Peter was martyred around the year 65. Experts believe that the author of this letter belonged to the school or community of Christians who venerated Peter as their pastor and teacher. We hear about some of them in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where Paul distinguishes those who say, 'I belong to Cephas' (that is Peter) from those who say, 'I belong to Paul' (1 Cor 1:12). It is said to be written from 'Babylon' – that is, Rome. After the year 70, Babylon was a common code name for Rome, whose armies had destroyed Jerusalem in that year (5:13). It should not surprise us to find links in this letter with Paul's Letter to the Romans. Tradition assures us that both Peter and Paul were put to death in Rome.

The final verses of the letter refer to Silvanus and Mark and connect us with Paul and the gospels (5:12-13). Paul names Silvanus as the co-author of his two Letters to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:1). He lists him as a missionary colleague in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:19). He is probably to be identified with Silas, Paul's companion in the Acts (Acts 15:27). If the Mark whom the author of the letter calls 'my son', is the Mark whom we meet as an associate of both Peter and Paul in Acts (12:12; 12:25) and the writer of the Gospel of Mark, we are reassured that this letter of Peter belongs to the family of the books and people of the New Testament as a whole.

In this article, we look briefly at the six passages from the letter that we hear on Sundays 2-7 of the Easter season in Year A. They can be the voice of the Lord for us as we prepare for Ascension Day and Pentecost. Their author wrote to 'encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God' (5:12).

A blessing (1:3-9) – Second Sunday of Easter

Paul usually begins his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving. Two of them, however, begin with a 'blessing' (2 Corinthians 1:3-11; Ephesians 1:3-14), and Peter follows this example. The first stage of a public speech in that culture was the *captatio-benevolentiae*, in which the speaker aimed to gain the goodwill of his audience, to present them with the positive rather than the negative in their situation, to establish their confidence in the speaker. Peter does this in the opening of the letter.

He speaks first of God. God is the unseen and usually silent presence in our biblical books. All that Peter says about him is that he is the 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', that he is a God of mercy and that he has raised Jesus from the dead. Because of him we have a living hope and an inheritance, 'imperishable, undefiled and unfading'.

Reading on, we learn about faith and love. The paragraph concludes with words to cheer us, like 'joy' and 'rejoice'. Jesus Christ is mentioned a third time: with his revelation comes 'praise and glory and honour'. And what about our troubles? Our author knows about these, because 'for a little while, you may have to suffer various trials'. The good news of the kingdom put these trials in perspective. The final part of this 'blessing', which we do not hear, is worthy of our attention. It tells us about the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit, about prophets and angels, about the sufferings of Christ but also about his glory (1:10-12).

Our ransom (1:17-21) - Third Sunday of Easter

We pick out three points from these four verses, as we consider God, Christ and those addressed in the letter. We begin and end with God: again, he is called Father, but he is a Father who judges, as we know from St Paul (Rom 2:16); he is to be approached with fear, but not a servile fear so much as with a fear that means awe and

reverence. The concluding sentence repeats that he raised Christ from the dead.

These references to God the Father bracket instruction about the person of Christ. His destiny was established before the foundation of the world; this echoes the blessing we find in Ephesians where the writer reminds us how God chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). Christ is called a lamb, imagery familiar to us from John's Gospel where John the Baptist points to the 'Lamb of God' (John 1:29), language hinting at the Passover lamb of Exodus (Exod 12:3), and Paul too calls Christ our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). Christ in the Book of Revelation figures as a lamb (Rev 5:6; 19:9). In a world where religious practice required the blood of animals slaughtered in sacrifice, the author contemplates the blood of Christ. This blood brought about our ransom. Jesus in Mark's Gospel describes himself as the Son of Man who was to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).

Those addressed are in exile. As people of the Dispersion (1:1), they are far from their actual homes, but as a people living between the resurrection of Christ and his return in glory, they remain a pilgrim group on a continuing journey. Again, we hear about faith and hope. They have put aside the futile ways of their old life, suggesting the pagan culture of ancient Rome and its provinces. We will hear more about these ways later in the letter. We modern readers can easily identify with the first audience of the letter.

Unjust suffering (2:20-25) - Fourth Sunday of Easter

Following the lectionary order, we read a text from the end of the second chapter of the letter before verses from its beginning. We ask again what we can learn about God, about Christ, about those addressed. The latter are identified in the opening verse of this paragraph, which is omitted in our reading. They are 'house slaves' (2:18). Wives married to unbelieving husbands are instructed in the next paragraph, and certain 'husbands' thereafter (3:1,7). Here are clues as to the social make-up of the Christian communities addressed.

There is a single reference to God: we read in the Jerusalem Bible translation, 'the merit in the sight of God, is in bearing punishment patiently when you are punished for doing your duty.' A more literal translation would be, 'this is a grace before God', or as in the Revised Standard Version, 'you have God's approval'. It is part of the reverential fear of God encouraged in last week's passage.

What follows after this initial statement is punctuated as a single sentence in the Greek text. Its solemn poetic format suggests that this is a liturgical hymn, similar to the hymn about the emptying of Christ in Paul's Letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:6-11). It is used as a canticle in the Evening Prayer of the Church on Sundays during Lent. It contemplates Christ and the sufferings of Christ, elaborated in three 'who' clauses, each of which can be expanded from the passion story familiar to us from the gospels. It is dependent on the fourth servant song of Isaiah (Is 52:13-53:12), familiar to us from the Good Friday liturgy where it prepares us for the proclamation of the passion story according to John (Jn 18:1-19:42). We may be intrigued that the author does not appeal to his own memories of the passion, but turns rather to a centuries-old text of Isaiah. We know about another reader of this text: the Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip found reading it in his chariot on the road to Gaza (Acts 8:28).

A royal priesthood (2:4-9) – Fifth Sunday of Easter

If last week we were invited to reflect in tranquility with Isaiah on the sufferings of Christ, this week we are invited to join pilgrims of old on pilgrimage to God's temple in Jerusalem. According to Psalm 118:22, the pilgrims would sing, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone'. According to

Matthew, Jesus, quoting this verse in conversation with his critics in the temple, applied these words to himself (21:42). With the readers of the letter, we are to recognise Christ as the cornerstone of church community. The author quotes the similar text of Isaiah where God says, 'I am laying in Zion a tested stone, a precious cornerstone' (Is 28:16). Paul quotes this same text in his Letter to the Romans in his discussion of the continuing place of the Jewish people in God's promises (Rom 9:33).

It is regretted that there are those who do not believe, and they are those who stumble on this stone. We remember that Peter, on refusing to accept Jesus's words about his coming suffering, is himself called a *skandalon*, which means a stone of stumbling (Matt 16:23).

But Jesus is not the only building stone. The people can take pride in being living stones who build themselves up in God's sight not as a temple but as a holy priesthood. The language is that of the book of Exodus (Exod19:6). The people of Israel are no longer a bunch of wandering fugitives but have their dignity as a royal priesthood, a holy nation and as God's own people. The Book of Revelation likewise identifies the people of God as 'a kingdom, priests to his God and Father' (Rev 1:6). This language is taken up in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium* §9).

Gentleness and reverence (3:15-18) - Sixth Sunday of Easter

In his letters, Paul first likes to outline his doctrinal teaching, which he then follows up with instructions on Christian behaviour. A typical example is the opening of chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans where he writes, 'I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God' (Rom 12:1). As we enter the second part of 1 Peter, we find a similar emphasis on behaviour. It is no surprise to find Christ mentioned at the beginning and end of our text. He is the one whom we are to reverence.

Life for the scattered readers of this letter is not easy. Their way of life puzzles the society around them. They are subject to false accusations. Sometimes their faith brings them suffering. But a withdrawal from the world is not to be their response. They were to be prepared to give an account of their hope. Their lives were to be lived in gentleness and reverence. The word for gentleness is that applied by Jesus to himself in Matthew's Gospel: he is 'gentle and lowly in heart' (11:29). Jesus said the meek would inherit the earth (5:5). Their day-to-day lives were to be lived 'in Christ', an expression common in Paul's writings. The Christian lives in union with Christ: 'if anyone is in Christ, one is a new creature' (2 Cor 5:17).

Peter, like Paul, cannot be silent about Christ. Our text begins with a reminder that not Caesar in Rome but Christ was their Lord. It ends with another poetic fragment about Christ, 'being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit'. Here is another mantra for us to memorise, and we might reflect that the Easter message is not so much about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:2) as about the person of Christ.

Living as Christians (4:13-16) - Seventh Sunday of Easter

This final reading consists of four verses taken from a paragraph of eight verses. It is worth glancing at the verses we omit. The first verse is addressed to the 'Beloved', a heading that prepares the audience listening for the challenging instruction ahead, which warns of a 'fiery ordeal'. No details are given, but we learn from what follows of some of the stresses consequent on the choice of a Christian life. Insults were just part of the picture. We can count the frequency of words for suffering in this paragraph, but we balance these with words referring to 'glory'. If they are insulted because of the name of Christ, they are to rejoice. This mention of joy and rejoicing returns us to the blessing with which the letter began. This juxtaposition of joy and suffering is a paradox which runs through the letter.

The final verse mentions God, again in brief terms, but he is given a title found nowhere else in the New Testament. He is 'faithful creator'. The Church is the 'household of God'. The spirit of God, possibly an echo of Isaiah's text about God's six-fold spirit, rests on the suffering Christians (Is 11:2). The last words of our reading urge us to 'glorify God'.

Twice we meet the name of Christ. Then we hear the word Christian and with this word, we hear again of suffering. The word Christian occurs three times in the New Testament. It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christian (Acts 11:26). We know from Paul's Letter to the Galatians that Peter was active in Antioch (Gal 2:11). Paul, on trial before Festus, the Roman governor, is mocked by Herod Agrippa: 'In a short time you think to make me a Christian?' (Acts 26:28). If we are to suffer, it is to be because we are Christians, not because we are criminals.

Journey's end

When we travel to far-off places and find ourselves far from home, we appreciate the company of a good friend and guide. In our pilgrim journey between Easter and Pentecost, we put ourselves in the company of Jesus and his original apostles as he spoke to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:2). We listen to Peter, his leading apostle, as we read in our exile the letter sent out long ago in his name with Silvanus to distant Roman provinces. May his words deepen our knowledge about God, about the Lord Jesus Christ and about our own calling as Christians so that we may become better citizens of the Kingdom of God.

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