1 Peter 4:12-19
Coping when we face abuse for being a Christian

It was 2001. I was a Vicar in Stratford in East London. The doorbell went. I opened it and John was standing there. I knew John quite well. An alcoholic in the parish; quite a nice guy when he was sober, really not a nice guy when he was drunk. On that day, he was drunk. Very drunk.

Before I could greet him, he pushed past me and walked into the kitchen. I followed him and he pulled out a knife and told me to sit down. For the next half an hour, he waved the knife in my face, ranting and raving about how God had destroyed his life and destroyed him and how he was going to kill me because he wished he could kill God instead.

After half an hour, my daughter Rebekah walked in from school: she was 7 at the time. She knew John and very calmly saw what was going on. She walked to the food cupboard and offered John a packet of crisps, which he ate. And then she offered him a Satsuma, which he ate. And then she said, "Will you let my Daddy go, please?" And she took him by the hand and led him out the front door and as it closed behind us, we both burst into tears…

John hated God and, as a result, when he was that drunk, he hated me too - and wanted to take out all his hurt and anger on me.

As a parish priest – as an ordinary Christian – how was I to react to that level of animosity?

Last week, as we thought about Peter's letter, we considered how to respond to peer pressure from others, which sometimes makes it very hard for us to take make the decisions we know we should if we want to stay faithful to God rather than just going with the crowd to save our own reputation. And we thought about the four steps outlined by Peter to resist peer pressure: First, to have a new mindset, claiming our true identity in Christ; Second, to make decisions and lifestyle choices from out of that new mindset; Third, to always act with love and without judgement towards those who we might not agree with; Fourth, to use our spiritual gifts to serve and minister to others in a non-judgemental way. Peer pressure is a real problem for most, if not all, of us. It's not just a problem for children and young people but just as much for us as adults too.

But it's not just peer pressure that we may face as Christians. The truth is that many of us have faced, or will face, real animosity too as we stand firm in the faith.

For some of our brothers and sisters overseas, that animosity is severe indeed and results in real and sustained persecution. And I just want to take a moment here for us to remember those who suffer in a way that we can scarcely imagine. The truth is that persecution of Christians is worse now than at anytime in the last 2,000 years of the church's existence. According to latest statistics, around the world each month: 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 churches are destroyed by those who want to destroy Christianity, and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians in the form of beatings and rapes, arrests and forced marriages. That is each and every month – and the figures are increasing. In more than 50 countries around the world, day by day, our brothers and sisters are in fear for their lives for doing no more than you and I are doing here this morning. As we increasingly become a mission-shaped church, we absolutely must develop a strategic response to this horrendous situation and engage as best we can in support of the persecuted church: but that is a topic for another day.

But this morning, we are reminded in Peter's letter that persecution is a reality for many, and a possibility for even more and that, as Christians, we must be prepared for that. And even if we are not persecuted, many of us will face real animosity as we share the faith and live the faith with friends, family, and work colleagues.

How are we to respond to that and live out the faith in the light of this reality?

Well, Peter speaks into this situation in the reading we've just had and if you want to follow it with me, you will find it on page 252 in the New Testament, the second half of the pew Bibles.

And Peter begins with this very straightforward idea in verse 12: "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."

Peter is making a really pragmatic point here: why should we be surprised when we face animosity from others because of our faith? After all, Jesus had predicted that this would happen…In Mark 13:9, Jesus had said, "They will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten…and they will bring you to trial". In Matthew 5, as we've just heard read, Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you

falsely on my account…" No Christian in the early Church was in any doubt that persecution or facing animosity was a likelihood for them.

As we look around the world today, and as we consider the society in which we live, we shouldn't be surprised either. And, of course, Jesus himself was eventually killed for standing firm in the truth.

So Peter has quite a pragmatic understanding of suffering for the faith; it had been predicted by Jesus, it had been modelled to us by Jesus and so it was to be understood as part and parcel of being a Christian.

In this opening verse, Peter uses the phrase that this is a 'fiery ordeal' that we go through when we face animosity for being a Christian. It's an interesting phrase, isn't it? And it's one that is used in Proverbs 27:21 as the method by which gold and silver are refined and tested And there is a clear sense in which Peter understands the sufferings of Christians in this sense: it is one method by which our faith is tested, our endurance tested.

That is so true for us, isn't it? Nothing tests our faith more than when we are mocked or ridiculed or misunderstood for the faith we hold. It is a test of endurance. And as we come through it, so we discover that our faith is made stronger, not weakened, because we are called upon to reassess exactly why we are a Christian and why we are determined to hold fast to the faith.

I imagine that Jesus himself, as he was dying on the cross, was going through a time of self-reflection so that he could understand exactly why he was dong what he was doing and reminding himself that, even in this extreme moment of horror, his Father God was in control and the purposes of God were being fulfilled. And as he reflected on that, so his resolve to endure would have been strengthened.

Well, when you and I face animosity from others because of our faith, we are inextricably linked to the suffering of Jesus on the cross, as Peter says in verse 13: "But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings…"

The suffering and passion of Christ has become for us a pattern of living and as we follow his example, so we are united with Christ in his sufferings.

And Peter says that we are to rejoice when we face animosity, not because we are seeking it out or that we have some sort of masochistic streak, but because we know that the joy to come from standing firm in the faith far outweighs the current negative experience.

Perhaps we often wonder how the saints and martyrs are able to rejoice in the midst of their suffering; it seems an all too superhuman thing to do. But Peter says that it is possible for all of us to be glad in the midst of suffering if we contextualise our current traumas in the light of that which is to come, verse 13: "Rejoice…so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed".

So when the second coming of Jesus happens, those who have been oppressed will be glad and will shout for joy. That is the hope that keeps the persecuted church going through their trials and it is the hope that we must cultivate amongst ourselves so that if we are ever called to the fiery ordeal, we will not be found wanting…

It was 1999. I was in India, in a very rural eastern region near Gorakhpur. I was training youth workers from India and also some others who were being brought in from Nepal. I was in a small town where there was strong opposition to Christians and the work I was doing was being kept very quiet. Somehow, my presence leaked out and some of the opponents of Christianity came to the house. They stood outside and started throwing bricks and rocks at the house to intimidate me and get me to leave. This went on for many hours and news came through to us that there was a threat on my life. So I had to be smuggled out and escape to another town elsewhere in the region.

As a missionary priest – as an ordinary Christian – how was I to react to that level of animosity?

The first step to facing animosity, as we have seen, is to put it into context: the context of suffering with Christ and the context of the future glory, which is ours if we stand firm and endure. The second step to facing animosity is to make sure that we are not aggravating the situation and making it worse by how we are behaving.

It has been a recurring theme throughout Peter's letter that there is nothing inherently good about suffering in and of itself; suffering is a neutral concept. There is nothing meritorious about suffering for the wrong thing: if we make wrong choices in life and suffer as a result, there is no

merit with God in that. But if we suffer as a result of choosing to live in obedience to God, then there is merit with our Father in heaven.

And Peter repeats that idea here in verse 15: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief-maker”. Now this seems like a bit of a bizarre list – it doesn’t seem very coherent; it’s almost as if Peter is plucking ideas from out of the air: murderer, thief, criminal, mischief-maker. I think he is just drawing examples of some of the types of things that people suffer for.

However, the interesting comment here is the word ‘mischief-maker’ - and I think we do have something we can take from this word.

It’s the only time that this word is found in the New Testament and it doesn’t appear to have been used in the Greek language before 1 Peter and it is only used a few times in Christian writings after this letter. In fact, there are only three more uses of it in early Christian literature. One of these was by Dionysius the Areopagite in the 5th-century and this is the only comparable usage with Peter’s use of the word here.

When Dionysius uses the word ‘mischief-maker’, he is referring to bishops who meddle in the affairs of Dioceses beyond their own; bishops who don’t know the boundary of their own authority and get involved in moralising and influencing decisions in parts of the community that are beyond the boundaries of their own authority. In other words, this idea of a ‘mischief-maker’ here is someone who meddles in things that are none of their business, particularly in the realm of moral values.

It seems that Peter and Dionysius are referring to people who see themselves as the guardians of moral values in society when actually they have no right or authority to offer an opinion or seek to influence behaviour.

So I think what Peter is saying here is that Christians need to recognise the boundaries of the Christian community and not try to legislate morality for others.

Now, if that is the case, then it opens up a really interesting debate about the extent to which the church should be attempting to put Christian values at the heart of legislating a non-Christian world. Is it right for the church to want non-Christian Parliaments to uphold the Sabbath by not having shops opening on a Sunday because it is deemed to be a Christian value? Is it right for the church to expect Bishops to sit in the House of Lords in a parliamentary system that is inherently secular?

Now, I’m not saying what is right or wrong here: I’m merely saying that, for some people who aren’t Christians, these are the types of things where we are seen to be ‘mischief-makers’ and, as a result, we can face animosity from people. Perhaps it is sometimes the case that we, as Christians, bring animosity upon ourselves by meddling in matters that do not rightfully come under our authority or by claiming that ‘this is a Christian country’ - when clearly it isn’t - and we expect non-Christians to live by the values we want to push onto them. If we are not open to the sensitivities of those who do not follow our faith, according to Peter, they will rightfully get annoyed with us and show animosity towards us.

So Peter is being pragmatic here and saying, don’t just wind people up by asking them to sit under the tenets of the Christian faith when it is not something they profess to believe. That goes for our interaction as a church with civil society but it also goes for us as individuals within our families and amongst our friends who may not share our Christian faith. We need to be sensitive to others at all times…

So in conclusion then, how do we respond when we face animosity from others as a result of us living out the Christian faith?

Firstly, keep the experience in context and remember that, for those who endure to the end, there is a future glory waiting for us.

Secondly, make sure that the animosity we are facing is not a result of us meddling in matters where we have no moral authority to do so and, if we are meddling, stop doing it and find another way to express the Christian faith that will be less annoying to other people.

It was 33AD. He was a carpenter in a little village in Palestine. After plying his trade for 30 years, he suddenly started getting involved in religious and political life, healing the sick, raising the dead, proclaiming a new Kingdom. The people in power at the Temple and in the Roman court saw him as a ‘mischief-maker’ and decided to get rid of him. So they mocked him and beat him and tortured him and crucified him. At first, he struggled to understand what was happening to him and shouted

out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But then he was able to put all that hatred and all that animosity into its appropriate context and he cried out to God, “It is finished! Into your hands I commend my spirit”. And, as a result of enduring his time of trial, the carpenter was glorified and welcomed into the presence of his Father and honoured and adored for all eternity.

Mocked, beaten, tortured, crucified, faced with the most horrendous, undeserved treatment we can imagine…

As ordinary Christians, how are we to react to that level of animosity?

How are we to respond to the carpenter who endured so much on our behalf?

Perhaps when animosity comes our way, we are to endure all things for him as he has endured all things for us.

That is the context of our suffering. And in that context, when we face animosity, there is only one way we can possibly respond…