

John Docherty, May 28, 2017
“Rejoice when suffering for Christ ...”

The theme of suffering is one that comes up from time to time in the Lectionary readings. In some ways, it could be seen to be the predominant theme of the entire Bible if we were to consider the various ways in which humanity struggles in this Book.

From the very beginning of Genesis, we have a story of disobedience and its painful consequences;

we have stories of great floods and desert wanderings;

we have the people of Israel crying out for deliverance from one crisis after another;

we have an itinerant preacher, in the person of Jesus, being chased out of town after town, and stories of plots against his life;

we have the story of his final passion and death;

and we have multiple references to the sufferings of the early church, including the passage we read this morning.

The Book is of course not just a litany of suffering. It's also a collection of encouragements to not despair; a promise that God is in control; and a declaration that in spite of all that might befall us, God does, in fact, care deeply about our welfare.

There are obviously multiple kinds of sufferings that can afflict us :

- sufferings caused by wilful sin and its consequences;
- sufferings caused by the actions of others;
- sufferings arising out of natural disasters over which we have no control;
- sufferings caused by health issues;
- sufferings generated by our own anxieties about life and our fears for ourselves or the people we love.

The passage from Peter addresses yet another kind of suffering : suffering provoked directly by our faithfulness to Christ.

And that's what I'd like to focus on this morning : what does it mean for us to suffer for our faithfulness to Christ?

When Peter says, in effect, “Rejoice in your sufferings”, he's not suggesting a lighthearted, positive-thinking approach to real distress. He's pointedly focused on suffering in a very specific context : suffering experienced precisely because we are Christian. And I don't think he's actually suggesting one should revel in this suffering so much as offering perspective on what is happening; a call to not despair.

And I believe he's talking about very real suffering – the risk of physical danger and possibly death at the hands of those who seek to stifle the message of Christ.

In Peter's immediate context, I think it's fairly certain that the main source of the persecution he's alluding to comes from the Jewish religious leaders of the day. As far as the political authorities were concerned, Christians were simply a sect of Judaism which had status as an authorized religion, and so the Christians would have had full freedom to engage in their religious practices on the assumption that these were Jewish practices.

He's writing at a time that predates the generalized persecution Christians suffered under the Roman Emperor Nero. By Nero's time, around AD 55-70, Christians had established themselves as quite separate from Judaism and had become more and more suspect as being somehow seditious or dangerous.

When the city of Rome burned in AD 64, suspicion was cast on the Christians for example, and the persecution began in serious fashion.

As an aside, it is generally supposed that Nero himself was behind the burning of the city because of his desire to rebuild it, seeing himself as something of a great architect and master builder.

As an aside to *that*, while you might sometimes hear of Nero fiddling while Rome burned, I've read that coins of the era have his bust on one side and a set of primitive bagpipes on the other, suggesting that he may have actually *piped* while Rome burned ... just thought that may be of interest to some of us ...

So for the next couple of hundred years, persecution comes largely from the political authorities, until the middle of the fourth century when Constantine

converts and makes Christianity one of the primary religions of the Roman Empire.

From this point on, I think we could argue that the principal source of persecution of Christians, in Europe at least, comes from within the church itself. There *are* periods of threat from without – from Attila the Hun in the 5th century; the rise of Islam in the 7th century; Genghis Khan in the late 12th / early 13th century.

But the primary threat to those who are trying to live faithful Christian lives comes from those who have a different view on faithfulness or on theological orthodoxy.

The Great Schism between the Western and Eastern churches in Europe in the 11th century; the Inquisition of the 13th through 15th centuries; the persecution of heretics throughout Europe through to and during the reformation of the 16th century, the religious wars of Europe during the 16th and 17 centuries, ...

By the time we get into the 18th and 19th centuries the physical threats are perhaps a little less dramatic. Today, there are still communities of Christians who are at risk by virtue of the fact that they are a religious minority in their society. We can point to attacks on Coptic churches in Egypt; on churches in areas under the control of ISIS. Mind you, that persecution is not limited to Christians, and extends to other religious minorities, even within Islam itself.

But the on-going antagonism between competing theologies within Christianity continues today. The fact that we have multiple denominations, with multiple sub-groups, is a symptom of our need to find a safe place to live out our convictions.

But let's focus on our own context here in North America, here in Canada, here in Québec, here in Montréal.

It *is* true that we live in a society in which Christianity is at best marginalized, and at worst actively treated in a hostile manner. In a context like that, it might be tempting to point to our alienation as a form of suffering; an expression of rejection.

And it is *that*. We can quite naturally feel persecuted or personally mocked when our faith is rejected and mocked.

But that shouldn't feel overly difficult for Mennonites. We take pride in the fact that we are counter-culture; that we are in the world but not of the world; that we are a separate people. On *that* level, we've embraced Peter's call to rejoice when we suffer for our faith. It's a badge of honour, rather than a source of pain.

I think for us the pain is more acute when we feel rejected or mocked from within the community of faith. I know I've been guilty of saying things from this pulpit that have diminished or poked fun at other christian traditions. I've sometimes stated things in ways that were perhaps dismissive or disrespectful of other ways of understanding how God is at work in the world.

I certainly haven't done any of that in a deliberate attempt to hurt or offend anyone, but that may well have been the result. There's a fine line to walk when defining what we believe to be true, and expressing that with confidence and conviction, while remaining respectful of honest conviction on the part of others and accepting the possibility that others may have a better handle on the truth.

It's a delicate balance that needs to be struck when trying to promote one way of understanding faithfulness while at the same time allowing others the right to promote their way of understanding faithfulness.

We may suffer if we feel we need to constantly explain or justify ourselves and our beliefs. I am not a Mennonite by chance – I'm a Mennonite by choice, because I have found in this community a body of people who share, more or less, my perspective on what constitutes faithfulness.

And I am a member of this particular Mennonite community – MFM – by choice as well, because I've found here a place I can call home, where I feel I can grapple with the fine-tuning of my faith.

I would feel less comfortable here if I wasn't fine-tuning, but grappling with the foundations of my faith, or constantly in tension with what I perceived to be the basic understanding of faithfulness present here.

By way of an example of what I mean, when Mary-Lou and I moved to Québec in 1981 I got a job in a foundry. Some of you will already be familiar with this story. We made small precision castings for aircraft. I was working in the quality control department, and because I was working with the specification sheets, I became aware that virtually all of the parts were for attack helicopters, guided missile systems, and fighter jets for the US and Israeli military.

Well, I had a problem with that. I struggled with what to do : we had one child already who was barely a year old, and Mary-Lou was within a couple of months of giving birth to our second son. We brought the dilemma to the church here as a

prayer request for wisdom.

The church's response was that they understood why I had an issue with this job.

They understood why I felt I couldn't continue.

They understood that my faith was on the line and that I had an important decision to make.

I knew that that wouldn't have been the case in other churches I had attended.

I knew that in other groups I would have had to explain myself;

I would have had to justify my ultimate decision to leave the job;

and I would have had to possibly face pressure to act “responsibly” by keeping a job that provided for my family.

I would have suffered not only under the weight of my own anxiety around what would happen if I left my job, but also under the weight of the disapproval of people I respected and looked to for guidance.

I was grateful that here at MFM I knew that I was safe to express my misgivings about the job, and that I could count on their understanding and support.

Because I knew that *they* knew that for me this was a question of faithful obedience to how I read Scripture, and to what I believed God expected of me. I felt validated, supported, and respected.

Paradoxically, it is *also* true that I eventually grew to feel that MFM wasn't quite in line with other areas of my faith and theology. And so, Mary-Lou and I finally left this congregation and attended elsewhere. It took us several years to discover that we were more comfortable here than we probably ever felt anywhere else – and we eventually returned.

We feel like we *fit* here.

We feel like we *belong* here.

We feel like we can explore and question with the others in this circle what it

means to be faithful without fear of judgment.

I hope every one of us here feels like MFM is a good fit;

I hope every one of us here feels that we belong here.

I hope every one of us here feels like we can explore and question with the others in this circle what it means to be faithful without fear of judgment.

And I hope not one of us feels like they don't have a safe space to express and live out their own convictions about what it means to be faithful.