A Different Community and a Different Response
1 Peter 3:8-12

Imagine your country's at war and one day the air raid sirens go off and you run to the bomb shelter. But when you get there you find everyone fighting, pushing and shoving and throwing punches and shouting at one another.

So you go find a quiet corner, get out your phone and go on-line to find out how the war's going. But what you read is that your country's army is beginning to turn on itself. And your own side is fighting itself.

What would you say to all that? Something like, guys, I think we've forgotten who the enemy is. And if we carry on like this defeat's certain.

Well, Peter's writing to Christians who are coming under attack from wider society for being Christians. And v9 gives us a hint of what they're facing, 'Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling.' The implication being that they're on the receiving end of evil and they're being reviled. Which means that in an honour-shame culture like theirs, they're being insulted and shamed and their reputations are being trashed. Which won't just have an impact on their reputations, but their livelihoods, on who's willing to work with them or associate with them.

And the danger of living under that kind of pressure, of facing incoming missiles, is that you begin to lash out - and not just on those attacking you, but your own side. You begin to mistake friends for enemies. Which obviously isn't a great idea.

But how are you supposed to respond? Well, in today's passage, Peter says in two ways. Firstly, by building and being part of an alternative community that's strong and yet kind, that can equip you for the battle. And secondly, and amazingly, that in that battle you don't return fire on those who fire on you.

A Different Community

Now, despite knowing the kind of hostility his friends are facing, Peter never suggests they retreat to the bomb shelter of a ghetto. In fact, as we've been seeing, rather than withdraw, he's been encouraging them to live lives of such beauty 'among the gentiles', chapter 2:12, that it attracts people to the gospel.

Which means that saying no to an attitude of withdrawl is not the same as becoming indistinguishable from the rest of society and just blending in: adopting their world-view and their practices. Instead, Peter says, they're to commit themselves to one another as a counter-culture. A culture within a culture. A society within a society. Not as a ghetto but as a haven, not as a silo, living in a parallel universe to everyone else, but as an oasis in the desert of the opposition they're going to face.

Verse 8, 'Finally all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.'

Now, firstly, who's he talking to? Because building up to this he's spoken of how everyone should be subject to governing authorities. Then he addressed servants, then wives and then husbands. But now, it's 'all of you'. Who does that include? Who does it leave out? Suddenly, we all have to sit up and listen, don't we. No one can doze off and go, 'o it's about wives, or husbands, married people, wake me up when he's done.' Nor can you go, 'oh, I know who needs to hear this! This is for them!'. Nope, it's for all of us.

And Peter gives 5 virtues, 5 attitudes of head and heart that will build the kind of community that can equip and support one another when life's hard as a Christian.

But before we look at them, how does the world, then or now, think you build community?

You see, back then, there was a consensus that if you wanted society to survive, there had to be a uniformity of thinking, a likemindedness. Everyone had to agree: this is how society functions, this is who comes where in the pecking order, this is how the gods should be worshipped. And if anyone rocked the boat, or were seen as undermining that, like these Christian did, then they were seen as a threat.

Fast forward to today, and that kind of uniformity of thinking has given way to a tribalism and individualism that's having a hard time maintaining any sense of wider community.

So, whether it's in the 1st or 21st century world, the attitudes Peter says these Christians should cultivate have the power to create a very different society.

Verse 8 again, 'Finally, all of you, *have unity of mind*.' Now, does that mean that the church is going to be a place where everyone's thinking the same way? Sure. When it comes to what we believe about God and Christ and the gospel, and about sharing and contending for the gospel and letting the gospel shape every area of our lives, Peter's saying, be united.

But unity is not the same as uniformity. You see, in Greco-Roman culture your identity was rooted in society, and your place in society. While today it's rooted in your tribe. Either way, people have a hard time dealing with differences of opinion, because those differences threaten society or the tribe and with it your identity. So back then, that led to these Christian being reviled and today it leads to cancel culture.

But the unity Peter's talking about is different, because while the church will contend for the truth about Christ and primary, right hand issues, we can love our neighbour even when we profoundly disagree with them on secondary, left hand issues because our identity isn't rooted in the tribe but in Christ, so we don't feel threatened by those differences.

Secondly, v8, 'all of you, have… *sympathy*.' Now, what does it mean to be sympathetic? It means to feel *with* someone, doesn't it. To weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.

The problem comes when we get those round the wrong way! I mean, imagine someone's experiencing conflict with their friends or spouse or co-workers over the Christian faith, or they're struggling with sin, or life is hard and it hurts. And someone says to them, 'o come on, buck up, it's not so bad, look on the bright side of life'. And they're weeping and we're saying, rejoice! And Peter's saying, look, if you're going to live faithfully as Christians, the world out there may be a place of antipathy, so be part of creating a community of sympathy. That bears one another's burdens and gently helping one another back up and back into the fight.

Thirdly, v8, 'all of you, have… *brotherly love*.'

Now, take our 4 girls. If they weren't sisters would they be friends? Because, if you know them, you know they are very different from each other. And the answer is, who knows? But they're family, so they love one another. And when one's feeling down, the others all pile in with encouragement.

And Peter's saying, God is our Father, and Christ is our brother, and that means we're family. And we might not have chosen one another, but God has. And we are loved by him, so we love one another. Even, especially, if the world doesn't.

Fourthly, v8, 'all of you, have… *a tender heart*.' Now, one of the dangers of life being hard is that your heart can become hard. And you're facing criticism and hostility and you can become a bit critical and hostile and a cynicism can seep into your relationships. Instead, Peter says, be soft-hearted.

In fact, the word he uses for tender hearted is not about your heart at all, but your intestines, because that's what the ancient world thought was the seat of your emotions. And if you think about it, we still talk like that today, 'I just have this gut feeling' or 'Ouch that got me right here.'

It's a word we could translate as *compassion*. It's what Jesus said the Good Samaritan showed the Jewish man lying broken in the road in his parable, and the religious people didn't.

And Peter's saying, treat one another in the church like that. You may be very different from one another, like the Samaritan and the Jewish man were very different. But be tender hearted with each other. The world outside might struggle to care for those from a different tribe, or across racial, social or political lines, but you be different. Be willing to stop, and expend yourself in care for one another.

Fifthly, v8, 'All of you, have… *a humble mind*.' Now, in Peter's day humility was considered a vice not a virtue, a sign of weakness. Because in an honour-shame culture, what matters is honour, and defending your honour. And humility's too weak to do that.

And yet, humility's having just as much a hard time of it in our 21st Century western culture. Like ancient Rome, Nietzsche viewed it as a sign of passive people, too weak to assert their own will to power. And social media does not exactly encourage humility, with its emphasis on putting yourself out there. While tribalism depends on proving yourself better than those over there.

And Peter's saying, but what others see as a vice, adopt as one of your defining virtues. And he knew something about humility and having to learn humility, didn't he? Because he'd promised that though everyone else might deny Jesus, he wouldn't, he'd be different, because he was better.

But he didn't know himself. He didn't know how much his own safety or the good opinion of others mattered to him. But now, he had a much better knowledge of himself and his weakness. And he's saying, guys, be humble. Don't think you're better than others, or you'll turn on each other. Instead create a culture of humility, where you think of and count each other more important than yourself.

So, live as Christians in a pagan world, and you're going to experience hostility. But not inside the church, Peter says. Instead, create a culture within culture, a society within society, a place where unity and sympathy, love and tenderness and humility shape the way we treat one another.

But, it's not just relationships on the inside that are going to be different.

A Different Response

Look at v9: 'Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless.'

Now, if you're living in an honour-shame culture, and your honour's at stake because you're being shamed, everything inside of you will be telling you - fight back, strike back. Treat them the way they've treated you, because that culture's shaped you.

But of course, that wasn't a problem just for them. You only have to see how storms brew up on the internet, or see how public figures attack one another, to know that desire to defend yourself and get even is alive and well. But the hard truth is, you don't have to look outside, do you? You just have to look at your own heart. I mean, think about the urge you feel when you're insulted or attacked or belittled. That urge not just to defend yourself but to give as good as you get.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's more subtle than that. Maybe it's just that little upswing of joy you feel when 'karma' strikes, and that person who was unkind to you has something bad happen to them.

And Peter's saying, yes but karma's not the gospel, and neither is repaying evil for evil or reviling for reviling.

Ben Ferencz, who died this week, was the last surviving prosecutor at the Nuremberg war trials. And he'd seen first hand the horror of the concentration camps. But despite being Jewish himself he wrote, 'I learned that vengeance is not a way to settle any of our disputes. Because if you turn loose the vengeance, everybody is going to kill everybody.'

And he's right, and yet Peter goes further. Because he doesn't just say, don't get your own back, *don't* do *this* - he also says, but *do* do this. And the thing they, and you and I are to do in the face of hostility, is to bless.

Listen to what Jesus said, "I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28).

Now, in Greco-Roman culture, to bless someone - literally to *eulogise* them - was to speak well of them. So at one level Peter's saying, 'someone speaks ill of you, well, in response, don't gossip about them, speak well of them.' But Peter and Jesus have got more in mind than that. Because in their Jewish, biblical culture 'to bless' someone went further. And it's to actively pray and ask for God's favour upon them.

So, Peter's saying, when you're facing hostility for your faith, bless that person. They're speaking badly of you, well, you speak well of them. More than that, speak to God on their behalf, and ask him to show them favour and grace and pour his goodness into their lives. And think, what would that do for the cycle of vengeance or name calling?

You see, Peter says that to live like that is part of what it means to be a Christian: v9 again, 'on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.' Now does Peter mean that we've been called by God in Christ, to be blessed by him, so we can now bless others? Blessed to be a blessing. Definitely. And yet, most commentators agree that here Peter's saying something slightly different. That as Christians we've been called to bless others, and there is a blessing to be had in blessing others. That one of the markers of what it means to be a genuine Christian is that we will pray for blessing on those who curse us. And as we do, we will experience a blessing.

Now, to be sympathetic and love and show compassion to those who you're united with in faith is one thing, but to want the best for those who insult us and demean us? What can make us even *want* do that, let alone do it?

A Different Motive

Do you ever find yourself having a song of the moment? And you find yourself singing or humming it to yourself all the time. Well, when Peter wrote this, I reckon his was Psalm 34. Because he's quoted it numerous times - like in chapter 2:3 and taste and see that the Lord is good. And in v10-11, he does it again, as he quotes Psalm 34:12-16, 'For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it."'

And David wrote that Psalm on the run from King Saul, who was after his life and while living among the Philistines. So this isn't a psalm written in some academic ivory tower. This was written when David was facing dangerous hostility himself and when his own integrity was being questioned.

And Peter saying, 'so, listen to David: if you want to enjoy life, if you don't want to be dragged down by everyone else's negativity, and constantly descend the spiral of speaking badly of everyone, then speak and do what's good, and seek peace and pursue it. And if you do, you'll rise above the noise, and even bad days, even hostile days can become good days.'

All of which is true. But it's more even than that, because throughout this letter Peter's been encouraging them and us to live this life with our eyes fixed on the one to come. As Hilary of Arles, a fifth century bishop who knew what it was to face the active hostility of a Pope wrote on these verses in 1 Peter, 'The present is evil, but the future is bright. We should always remember that'.

In other words, when Peter talks of us choosing to bless others even when they curse us, he's not preaching some kind of prosperity gospel. Live like this and you're going to be blessed, you're going to experience bright days and live a great life in this life. That may or may not happen. But what will happen is that by living like that, you'll be giving proof that you really are a Christian. That your ultimate hope is not in this life, but in the bright days and the glory of Christ in the one to come.

But the truth is, you can live like that and it all be a bit self-righteous. You don't lower yourself to the behaviour of others, or speak like they do, because you tell yourself, 'I'm better than that.' That to behave or speak like that is beneath you. But if you think about it, isn't that just looking down on them the way they look down on you? And we can think we're better than them they way they think they're better than us. And that's not seeking their blessing, it's pride.

So if we're genuinely to bless others when they curse us, we need something that doesn't just encourage us and remind us we're loved whatever others say, but that also humbles us by telling us we're no better than those who mistreat us.

So, v12: 'For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.' And we can bless those who curse us because we can know that ultimately vengeance and justice lies in God's hands, not ours. As Paul writes, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Rom 12:19)

But again, it's more than that. You see, when it comes to true righteousness, and not self-righteousness, no-one was more righteous than Christ. Because if here Peter quotes Psalm 34 and says God's ears are open to the prayer of the righteous, no wonder the writer to the Hebrews could say that 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications… *and he was heard* because of his reverence' (Heb 5:7). And so Jesus is the ultimate one on whom God's eyes looked and ears listened with pleasure. Who said of him, 'this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.'

And yet, in the Garden of Gethsemane, his prayer that the cup of suffering would be taken away was not heard, at least not answered in the affirmative. And rather than enjoying life, as the burden of our sin began to weigh down upon him he said, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." And at his trial he endured the scoffing and insults of his enemies. And at the cross, as God's wrath for our sin, for all the times we've not loved our friends, let alone our enemies, was poured upon him, he cried out "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" And God the Father turned his face away from him, as Peter's words from Psalm 34 came true for Christ, that 'the face of the Lord is against those who do evil' (v12). Not because he did evil, but because he bore ours. And he became a curse, that we might be blessed.

And when you see the Son of God humbling himself to death, even death on a cross, the most shameful of all deaths, for you, it has the power to profoundly humble you. And when you see him sympathising with you in your weakness, you'll sympathise with others. When you see how he has had compassion on you and come to you in your brokenness, like the Samaritan came to the Jewish man, you'll feel compassion for others. And we'll begin to show the same kind of sacrificial, putting-the-other-first love that Christ showed us.

But ask yourself, did Christ treat us with such grace and mercy when we were his friends? Did he wait for us to clean up our act, or get our politics right, or stop attacking others, before he blessed us? As Paul writes, 'God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.' (Rom 5:8). And when that sinks in, instead of returning reviling for reviling, we'll bless.

So this week, when someone cuts you up on the road, or you become aware of that urge to get your own back, or you find yourself harbouring unkind thoughts against someone, like that politician you despise or that person who criticises the faith, don't. Don't despise. Don't cuss them out. Instead, pray that God would bless them. And maybe stop watching those videos that encourage you to think that the greatest thing is watching someone shout down, or burn, someone else.

And to maintain that attitude of blessing in a divided world, you're going to need to be part of a different type of community. One that shapes you and changes you. One that's marked by unity and sympathy, by love and tenderhearted humility.

But for such a community to exist, you need to help build it. By making those virtues your virtues and by committing to it. So… if you're not in a home group, think about joining one. And if you are, spend some time this week praying for each member, and asking God to show you how you can love them and show them sympathy or compassion. How you can grow in unity and humility toward them.

And let the love Christ has shown us flow out in love for those inside and outside the church.