Westlake Church Lausanne

Good News to Share
1 Peter 3:13-17

Now imagine that the team you support has just won the championship – football, or basketball, or whatever. And you're watching the match and the final whistle blows, and you are over the moon. You have waited years for this moment! This is great news, isn't it! But what about your friend who supports the team that lost? It's not such good news for him, is it?

Or, imagine that you've been studying for years, and in the prize giving ceremony, after the final exams, you win that Prix d'Excellence. And when they call out your name – you are delighted, and you punch the air - 'yes! All that study, all those hours in the library when everyone else was playing, it's finally paid off!' It's great news, isn't it! But what about the person in your class who also wanted to win it? It's not such good news for her is it?

Now, why do I tell you that? Because the word the New Testament writers used to explain the Christian message, the gospel, was the word *evangelion* – which means *good news* – it was the word used for when a herald, sent from the emperor, or the king, went into the town square and proclaimed good news – that the battle had been won, that the king's enemies had been defeated, that peace would return. Victory, triumph, peace. It's good news! Great news! Unless, of course, you are the king's enemies.

And so whilst the New Testament writers use this word *evangelion*, good news, to describe what God has done for us in Christ, that message is not always received as good news by everyone, is it? For example, the gospel challenges those in power, who use fear and intimidation and oppression to get their way. The gospel challenges all of us who would rather live self-centred or self-focused lives. It challenges those of us who want to live just however we want to live, in how we use our bodies, or see sex, or use our resources. And because the message of what God has done for us in Jesus has often been seen as a threat, over the last 2000 years Christians have, at various times, faced persecution.

Now today, in the West, we don't face anything like what those who have gone before us have faced, and nothing that could really be described as persecution. However, because the message of Christ is often at cross-purposes with the flow of our societies and culture, we may encounter opposition. For example, by its very nature the gospel speaks of absolute truth, but in our post-modern, relativistic age, that can seem incredibly narrow-minded. The Christian message is that, ultimately, you're not your own king, which when you think you are, can seem offensive. And to take two highly controversial areas, the gospel differs with our culture in saying that your sexuality is *not* the most important thing about you; and it says that there is such a thing as hell, both of which seem totally unacceptable to the modern ear. So sure we don't face persecution, but when the Christian message is heard, and either understood properly, or misunderstood, it can face opposition.

And the context of tonight's passage is – how do you respond when that's the case? What are you supposed to do with this good news when you live in an environment where you might face hostility to the message?

And interestingly, Peter's answer is not 'withdraw into a Christian ghetto, where everyone thinks the same as you'. Rather, it's to engage those around you with the gospel, but to do that in such a way, and to live in such a way, that makes that gospel deeply attractive.

Let's look first at what he has to say about the message itself.

The Message:
Look at verse 15, where he says that our attitude should be one of 'Always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.'

So he summarises the Christian message as 'a reason for the hope that is in you.' So firstly, the gospel's about *hope*. Which is interesting, isn't it? Because *hope* is essentially positive. Peter doesn't say, 'give a reason why you obey all these rules, or why you can't live like everyone else but you really wish you could, or why you're critical or judgemental of others, or worse, why you're a hypocrite!' It's, 'when you are facing hostility and opposition for being a Christian, be ready to explain your *hope*.'

But why *hope*? Because neither religion, nor the surrounding culture, can give you hope, can they? Only the gospel can. You see, typically, religion gives you a target: you've got to achieve this, you've got to live to this standard, you've got to obey these rules, you've got to achieve this level of enlightment, if you are to stand any chance before God, or any chance of escaping an eternal cycle of death and rebirth. So typically religion only gives you hope in the sense that, 'I hope I can do enough; I hope I've done enough.' But implicit in that kind of hope is not confidence, but doubt, and uncertainty.

And our culture doesn't help either does it? Because certainly today our culture is about your image, how you appear to others; or your success, how you perform against others; or what you have – how that compares to others; or what you think and believe – does it fit in with others. And those things don't give you hope – rather culture puts you on a performance tread-mill, and like a little hamster, you've got to keep on running just to stand still.

But true Christian hope, the kind of hope the gospel holds out to you, is very different. And Peter opens this letter by talking about that hope: 1 Peter 1:3, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' So Christian hope isn't based on your

performance at all, is it? It's not based on whether you make the grade or fail to make it, it's based on God's mercy to you – his grace to you – how he treats you way better than you deserve to be treated. It's based on Christ's performance, what he has done for you, not what you have done for him – on his dying for you, and on his resurrection from the dead. And that's what makes it a certain hope, a living hope, and not the doubting, insecure have-I-done-enough hope of religion or our performance based culture. And with it you get this huge sense of inner peace and wellbeing and soul rest.

You see, Christ's resurrection changes everything, doesn't it? Life can never be the same again if Jesus really did die for our sins and rise from the dead. It gives you hope for your present, because if this is how much God loves you, that Christ died for you, and if he really has triumphed over my enemies of sin and guilt and death, then whatever I'm going through now has a purpose. So I can trust him with my *now*, because he loves me. And so the hope of the gospel can result in a very real joy, and a calm endurance, whatever difficulties we face.

But it also gives you hope for the future – for eternity. That God does and will accept me, because through Jesus I've become his child. Because of Jesus my sins are forgiven. Because of Jesus I can be found not guilty. And that means death no longer needs to be something that terrifies me.

And Peter makes this very personal, doesn't he? He says it's the 'hope that is *in you*'. Now that *you* is plural, so on the one hand he's talking to the church as a group. But they can't experience a collective hope for now and the future, without experiencing that as individuals, can they? So Peter is saying that this good news we're to share is the Gospel made personal, it's the good news of Jesus mediated through you as a person. So this is not about abstract propositions or purely intellectual arguments, is it? It's about how this hope for now, and the future, transforms your life for the better now. It's about being willing to talk about how it helps you cope with the downtimes, and how it stops you getting proud in the good times. How it gives you a sense of significance and meaning, that image or results can never give you. How it gives you an inner peace, even when life isn't going the way you want. And you know from the media, that there is something arresting about someone talking about their own experience.

Well, sure, but how are you supposed to talk about what Jesus has done for you when you might face opposition or mockery or hostility for doing so?

The How To:
Look again at what Peter says in v15, 'always being *prepared* to make *a defence* to anyone who asks you for *a reason* for the hope that is in you.' Prepared – defence – reason. In other words, each of us has to have thought through, and understood for ourselves, why the good news of Jesus really is good news, why it

gives you hope for now and the future. And you've got to be able to do that in ways that the person you're talking to understands. Which means no religious speak. But it also means answering the question they're asking, not the one you wish they'd ask. I mean how many of you have sat an exam, seen a question that asks something specific, which you don't know the answer to, so instead you mentally change that question to 'write everything you know about the subject' – which you proceed to do. And the problem is we can do exactly that with our friends and the faith, can't we. When I was a student my Christian friends and I agreed that we wouldn't work or revise on Sundays but we'd go to church and mess around and relax. But in the hothouse of exam time that kind of behaviour stood out. And we'd have other friends say stuff like, 'man I wish I could be as relaxed about this as you.' What do you say to that? The temptation is to give them 17 proofs as to why the Bible is the word of God and why we should take the 10 commandments and the law to keep the Sabbath seriously. But he's not asking tell me what the Bible teaches about the Sabbath, is he? He's talking about his inner anxiety of failing, and needing to perform, and why don't you Christians feel that the way I do?

So it's about trying to explain the hope and security we have as Christians in ways that are authentic and others find meaningful, and are not coated in 3 inches of sugary sweet religious speak. And that might mean remembering, or maybe even learning for the very first time, to think like someone who is not yet a Christian thinks.

But then Peter says something else: v15 again, 'yet do it with gentleness and respect.' Some years back we had some friends who didn't come to church, but whom we had slowly been building a friendship with. And one year they finally accepted our invitation to come to a Christmas carol service, and we were delighted. Except, during the refreshments afterwards, the husband came up to me, clearly offended, because one of our young students, a guy half his age, had just told him that he was going to hell unless he repented. And months of friendship went down the pan in one thoughtless conversation.

Why? Because he hadn't shown our guest respect, or treated him with gentleness. Instead he probably had an agenda, didn't he, maybe he wanted to go home that night and say, 'yes I got the gospel in! I talked to somebody about heaven and hell.' But in the process, he lost my friend.

And talking to others about the hope that's in you doesn't mean you have to ram the Bible down their throats. 'You've come to sing some carols, great, now swallow this!' It means you don't have to do everything or say all there is to say in one go. Speaking to others with gentleness and respect is about doing this with an attitude of humility. An attitude of humility to them, that carefully listens to them, and recognises where they're at. But also an attitude of humility towards God – because you know that ultimately it's not you who has to convert

anyone, it's God. You don't have the power to do that, only God does – so you just don't need to force anyone, or twist anyone's arm, or put them down, or get one over them. Ultimately it's God who draws people to himself. So you can relax.

And as an example of that let me tell you about my friend Maria. Maria is American, and we began university and medical school on the same day, and we were in the same college, and she was the first person I ever played any part in them coming to faith. And on about the second or third day at Uni four of us newbies got together for a coffee – we barely knew one another, but it turned out three of us were Christians. And at this point I'd only been a Christian for about 2 years or so, but I was keen. So I asked the girl on my right, how she became a Christian, and she explained, and then I asked the guy on my left how he'd become a Christian, and he explained. And then I asked Maria – and she said, I don't think I am one, but I'd like to become one. And that was it! And that afternoon, Maria gave her life to Christ, and she was born again, and she has never looked back! And none of us knew any apologetics, or any presentations of the gospel. I just asked her how she became a Christian, and she realised she wasn't one. It was a God-thing! Now that's not a reason not to equip yourself with answers to common questions, or learn simple and memorable ways of explaining the gospel! But it does mean you can treat people with gentleness and respect because you just don't need to pressure them or manipulate them. God will lead them to himself. You just have to be willing to give a reason for the hope.

But, you've also got to do that with a good conscience.

The Walk and the Talk

Look at v16, where Peter says, be ready to explain this hope, 'having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame.'

Now, one of the reasons people sometimes give in de-conversion stories, where someone who was maybe born and brought up in a Christian family, but then walks away from the faith, is that they were brought up thinking all non-Christians were terrible people - liars, cheats, unfaithful, and selfish, and then they go to university, or get out into the world of work, and discover that far from non-Christians being worse than Christians, sometimes they're better or nicer or more moral people than Christians. And so what they thought about the world is rocked and their Christian faith is rocked too.

But the fact that non-Christians are often nicer or kinder than Christians should only surprise you if you think the gospel is about being better, or more moral than everyone else. But if you know the gospel as it really is, that we're only saved by God's grace, then you'll know that the opposite is true, that it's precisely because we're so messed up that we need the gospel.

And yet, there's no doubt that religious hypocrisy is one of *the* great turn-offs for people, especially in an age that values authenticity so much. And yet, it's precisely that desire for authenticity that the gospel, and your life, can speak into. And that's what Peter means by having a good conscience. You see, a bad conscience comes, or should come, when you say one thing, but you live another – and there's this inner dissonance, this disconnect between what you say you believe and how you live.

But to be able to speak attractively and compellingly of your faith, we need to genuinely allow the gospel to transform our lives. And that doesn't mean waiting until you reach some level of perfection before you start talking, because then you'd be waiting a long time! But, for example, let's say you suffer from anxiety or fear, and so does your friend. Well, instead of pretending you don't, how does your faith in Christ help you deal with that? If you can be honest with your friends about that in a non-cringy way, that's a great thing. Because at the same time as acknowledging you're far from perfect, you're also pointing to Jesus. Or let's say you're going through a really tough period in life, and your self-esteem has taken a hit, or something bad has happened to you, how does God's love for you give you hope? You're not pretending you're sorted, but in your struggles you can point to Jesus. Or you're tempted by stuff, and you know you stumble and fall, and instead of pointing out others' failures in a critical way to make you feel better about yourself, you can express how Christ helps you keep a right focus. So walking the talk and living with a good conscience is not the preserve of some kind of imaginary, sorted, super-race Christian – it's about being honest about the mess of our lives, and how Jesus helps us make sense of it and changes it into something glorious.

The thing is though, how can you do that? How can you be willing to face criticism with an inner sense of peace and joy, whilst talking about stuff that is very personal to you, and not be defensive or antagonistic, and at the same time live a life consistent with the message, and being honest when you don't? How can you even get there?

The Message Becomes the Means
Well, look what Peter says right at the beginning, v14-15, 'Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy' – or, as other translations put it, set apart Christ as Lord in your heart.

So the ability to tell others about this hope, and about Christ, begins in our hearts, with us setting him apart as Lord. Because if you do that, he's the one you'll get your sense of significance from, he's the one you'll get your inner sense of security from.

You see, if you get your sense of significance, or how you feel about yourself, from what others think of you, or say about you, you're always going to be held hostage by others' opinions aren't you? And you'll be afraid to tell them about the real you, what you really think, or believe, or about your struggles; because you'll constantly be thinking, 'what will they think of me if I tell them that?'

But if Christ is your Lord, and Lord not just in theory, but in your heart, if what he thinks about life and about you, is what matters most to you, then it's incredibly liberating. It's why Peter can say, 'have no fear of them', because something bigger and better has your heart than what others think of you. And so you don't need to worry or fear that others will think badly of you, because when you know the gospel in your heart, you already know how bad you really are, so bad Jesus had to die for you. But you also know how loved you are, because Jesus did die for you.

And so when Christ is your Lord, it gives you this deep, secure hope – for now, and for the future, and it gives you the confidence, the fear-less-ness to give a reason for that hope.

And when you do that you can be gentle and respectful, because your inner sense of wellbeing doesn't depend on you scoring points, or beating the other one with your clever arguments. Your inner wellbeing comes from Christ's love for you. You know you've got nothing to prove. And it's that love that can motivate you to open your mouth in the first place – because you want them to experience that love for themselves. It's so much better than what our culture has to say to them.