

## Easter 7

### **'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you.'**

It's not often that I ignore the Gospel reading in favour of one of the others, nor do I usually ignore a major festival – cough, Ascension Day, cough – But Peter's words in today's epistle seemed to resonate with me and the situation we are in; long weeks of lock down and little hope for an early return to even (and I hate this phrase) a new normal.

Now, let's be honest, Peter was writing to the early church under severe persecution; arrests, tortures, executions; and our situation in no way compares, BUT, I have found myself struggling over the last couple of weeks and I know that a lot of you are feeling the same so let's have a look at how Peter's advice might help us through.

The first thing I want to put straight is that, although Peter thinks that what they are going through is some sort of test from God, I do not. That suggests that God somehow sends us bad stuff to see how we deal with it. Seriously? He is all knowing, eternally present and somehow he doesn't know how we cope? Even I know that the answer is 'badly' with large doses of 'very badly' thrown in. Nor does he send us bad stuff to 'build character' or 'stiffen our resolve' or any of that other psycho-babble.

God does not send bad stuff – full stop. Ever! Are we clear on this?

Bad stuff happens, that's life; what God does is give us the help needed to deal with it, and it is that aid and help that is shown in this reading.

I am going to separate it into three sections: before; during and after. In other words; how God prepares us for (Shakespeare alert) 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', how he supports us during trying times and how he helps us rebuild afterwards.

When we invite God into our lives we get a package deal rather better than the gift vouchers offered by a number of our insurance companies!

First and foremost we become aware of the sacrifices God has made on our behalf and the Grace that is offered through the death of his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Sacrifices made because of his overwhelming love for us. That he loves us beyond measure and beyond price. When we take that on board we begin to see ourselves differently. We recognise that we have value, that we are important and that knowledge gives us a resilience to cope with problems a little better. Not that we are immune to problems but that we have a solid foundation on which to stand as we deal with problems.

It is that strong foundation of the knowledge of God's love for us that gives us a better starting point.

Next we are given a series of things to do, a coping mechanism, for when trouble hits home. It begins with humility before God. In other words to recognise that you can't deal with the problem on your own, that He doesn't want you to deal with it on your own. I confess this is probably MY besetting sin. I know that he is there for me, I know that he wants to help, I know that he will help; but, for some reason (pride/stupidity – take your pick) I keep thinking 'oh I don't need to bother God about this, he is busy enough' – excuse me while I go slap myself! – it's doubly stupid in my case because when people say that to me 'we didn't want to bother you Vicar we know you are busy' it drives me crazy!

God wants us to turn to him, we need to recognise our need of him and just ask.

'Cast all your anxiety on him', in other words let him help you bare the burdens of your worries. Talk to him, off load, pray, heck – yell if you need to; a trouble shared is a trouble halved and all that. And remember that we can do this 'because he cares for us'. Again remind yourself that you are loved, resettle yourself on that firm foundation.

This is followed by a call to 'discipline ourselves' and resist temptation. The overriding temptation in the midst of trouble is to think that God doesn't care, that he is distant – worse – that he has no power. UTTER NONSENSE! He (psalm 23) walks with us through difficult times, we are not abandoned (note that it doesn't say we avoid the valley of the shadow of death but that God is with us). God's power is in strengthening our spirits with his Spirit. We don't avoid the troubles of the world but that he supports us through the troubles.

The discipline is to use the tools that he gives us, not to leave them on the side of the road – prayer, scripture, the daily service I gave you or others that are available online, and yes, even my sermons. (God moves in mysterious ways after all :-)) Because using these tools strengthens our faith and encourages us to rely on God all the more. It is one of those circles but and positive and up-building one.

And finally the ultimate promise – 'And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.' No matter what the world throws at us, no matter what happens to us, ultimately God reigns supreme and we will be restored; if not in this life then the next.

Okay I need to throw in an Alleluia there – 'Alleluia, Christ IS risen' .....

Death itself has been defeated by God's power and love! And just in case I haven't got the point across yet – **Isaiah 43:1** –

**But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.**

