

Sermon – 1 Peter 3:18-22 – Barry Wilkins

Before we dive into the text, let me get a small technical point out of the way concerning our passage. It concerns the strange sentence in our reading, v.19, “... *Jesus went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits* –”. There’s much controversy among scholars – some say it means Jesus went to hell to give people a second chance; others that he went to purgatory; others that the spirits were fallen angels. It seems to make no sense. I looked up all the English translations of the original that I could find – they all render it the same – Jesus went, although the Greek word means to journey, to travel, to migrate. I migrated in 1992 from England to Australia. My brothers there would say, “Barry went”, you would say, “Barry came”. Both are right, and both would say, “Barry migrated.”

When I went up to secondary school at the age of 11 – Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School for Boys (known as Chis & Sid, two outer suburbs of SE London) – we learnt Latin for 4 years as an extra language. I had already decided to become a doctor (at age 9, and no-one changed my mind), and Latin would be useful for medical vocabulary.¹ Our Latin teacher was Mrs Jackson, a tiny old lady, well past retirement age. At 11 I was her height; at 15 I was my height. We loved her, she loved us. When she walked into the classroom we would all stand, she would declare, “*salvete pueri*”, we would reply, “*salve magistra*”, she, “*sedete pueri*”. ‘Hello boys’, ‘hello mistress’, ‘sit down boys’. We could hold a conversation in Latin when I was 15, but though much escapes me now, I do remember many words. Why am I telling you this?

Do you know, the first ever translation of the New Testament, complete, from the original Greek into another language, which was Latin, was in the late 4th century, done by a Latin and Greek speaking, Christian scholar known as St Jerome. He translates our verse using the Latin word “*veniens*”, meaning, “coming”, not going. “*In coming, Jesus preached to imprisoned spirits*”. Exactly 1000 years later in the 1380s, the first ever complete New Testament translation into English was made, from Jerome’s Latin, by the famous John Wyclif (known as the ‘morning star of the reformation’, 150 years before the actual English reformation), and he translates, “*Jesus came*”. If Jerome was right, and I believe he was, then this verse is no longer strange; rather, it tells us that Jesus’ entire incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection are essentially a preaching mission to the world – he comes proclaiming the gospel, the good news of the redemption that He works for us. Everything falls into place now, the verse is no longer uninterpretable, so I’m going with Jerome and Wyclif, and Mrs Jackson.

Our short passage today is a treasure chest for us. And the gems that we shall find in this passage are these: **Christ the anointed one, Christ the righteous one, Christ’s earthly ministry, God’s patience and Christ’s earthly journey.**

¹ Latin finds its way into theological vocabulary, too, such as in sanctify, repent, justify, salvation, incarnation, redemption, vicar, minister [‘stands small’!] which are just about lifted from a Latin dictionary.

Christ, the Anointed

Almost every word in verse 18 is loaded with meaning. Remember verse 17 from last week, *'For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.'* And then verse 18, *'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.'* Even the first word, "for" is significant, a strong connecting word to the previous verse where Peter has referred to suffering for Christ. *For, Christ also suffered ...* . *Christ* is Greek, meaning *anointed*, always referring to Jesus Christ in the NT, just as *Messiah* means *anointed* in the Old Testament. Kings were anointed in the OT era, also prophets, also priests to perform their task of making the sacrifice for forgiveness of sins.

'Anointed' in this case is for the very purpose of Christ's entire ministry, especially His passion on the cross, where He was the unblemished lamb, sacrificed for us. Indeed, He was anointed for His entire earthly mission of bringing the gospel to humanity, in His teaching and in His deeds, all of which *spoke* God's Word of redemption. Linking with verse 17, *... it is better to suffer for doing good*, verse 18, *For Christ also suffered, once*. Once here means once and for all time. It never needs to happen again, and it is effective for all time, for those who have lived before Christ, and without knowledge of Him, according to their trust in the God of all grace, and for all in the future. *For Christ also suffered once and for all time, for or on account of sins, the righteous for the unrighteous*. Let us explore this word, 'righteous'.

Christ the Righteous

Christ was the only person ever to be truly righteous. What does *righteous* really mean? Is it just a mystical, religious word? Is it piety? Not at all. *Piety* or *pious* is not a Bible word in our English versions.² You may be familiar with a character in Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, the principal character's Godmother. She was described as going to church three times every Sunday, she went to meetings when there were meetings, to lectures when there were lectures, and she was so good that the badness of others made her frown all her life. That's piety, not righteousness. Righteousness means, simply, aligning oneself with God's righteous ways, or with His holiness.

Recently I emailed a theologian known to me, asking, 'how would you explain in a sermon, in two sentences, the difference between holiness and righteousness.' The reply was immediate, 'I would explain that they supply two different shades of meaning to the same essential character of God, that, first, He is different from sinful human behaviour ('holiness' means 'apart-ness' or 'other-ness'),³ and that, secondly,

² It is to be regretted that the NIV translates *fear of God* as *piety* in Job three times, ESV renders *Godliness* as *piety* once in Acts, and others use *piety* for *Godliness* elsewhere occasionally.

³ The OT word for holiness originally meant separated, some scholars say.

he conducts himself rightly ('righteousness', i.e. in accordance with his perfect character).' He added, triumphantly, 'One sentence!'

So Jesus, man with us but God for us, was truly holy, apart or different from us, and everything He did was righteous, that is, in accordance with His holiness. We can never measure up to that, so we are the unrighteous; we do not behave perfectly. The righteous for the unrighteous, and let's remember St Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:21, '*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*' 'Who got the better deal?', a sceptic might ask. Let's see what some biblical scholars said centuries ago.

The great reformers of the 16th century called this the "wonderful exchange." Christ received what was ours, and we received what was His. The saviour received upon Himself all our sin; we had His righteousness imputed to us. Our desolation became His desolation, we became counted as righteous.

John Calvin wrote, 'This is the wonderful exchange which, out of His measureless benevolence, He has made with us, that, by His descent to earth, He has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, He has conferred His immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, He has strengthened us by His power; that, receiving our poverty unto Himself, He has transferred His wealth to us ...'.

And Martin Luther, similarly, 'That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's, and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied Himself of His righteousness that He might clothe us ... and fill us with it. And He has taken our evils upon Himself that He might deliver us from them ... in the same manner as He grieved and suffered in our sins, and was confounded, in the same manner we rejoice and glory in His righteousness.'

We are still in verse 18. I do commend this verse to you – it is one of the great verses in the Bible, '*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.*' There's a double meaning for flesh there, because the word is used to label sin throughout the Bible, OT and NT. Wyclif's translation of this verse 18 goes like this, '*For Christ also died once for our sins, the just for unjust, that he should offer us to God, made dead soothly [truly] in flesh, forsooth [in truth] made quick [alive] in spirit.*' The *soothly* and *forsooth* mean *truly this* and *truly that*, retaining the emphasis of how opposite were His death and His rising again, and yet, both are essential components of Christ's ministry and His journey.

Old translations use the words *just* or *justice* for *righteous*. In the Jewish way of thinking, they are identical. We mustn't read *justice* in a Western legal sense, as in justice for refugees, justice for the marginalised, even justice for koalas or the environment. In the Bible, if the *righteous* words in the OT or NT are translated as *justice*, we should read, *righteous* or *righteousness*. Likewise, *justification* means '*counted as righteous*'. It is about how we conduct our lives – we must ask ourselves the question, 'are we lined up with God's ways?'

Not many people are described as righteous in the Bible – Noah, Abraham, Job, Simeon at Christ's birth [described as righteous and devout], for example.

Christ's earthly ministry.

Now let's look briefly at how Peter describes Christ's earthly ministry. He continues – '*... made alive in spirit, in which (or in whom) he came and preached (or proclaimed) to imprisoned spirits*'. The 'imprisoned' motif picks up a Bible metaphor for 'dead in sin'. Jesus uses this analogy when he quotes Isaiah in Luke 4:16-21, "*... And as was his custom he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.* ¹⁷ *And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,*

*¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
... liberty to the captives ...
sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

... ²¹ Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" ⁴

And, similarly, in Isaiah 42:1-7, '*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*' ⁵ ...

*⁵ Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:*

⁶ I am the LORD; I have called you [singular] in righteousness; ...

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁴ Luke is quoting the Septuagint here, the Greek translation of the OT which was better known than the original Hebrew. Lord is *Adonai Yahweh* in Hebrew, Lord GOD.

⁵ Justice in this passage is not the righteousness word, but another word meaning justice/judgement.

And others, for example, Isaiah 49:9, '*... saying to prisoners, "come out" ...*,'
Psalm 146:7, '*... The LORD ... sets the prisoners free ... opens the eyes of the blind ...*'.

We notice that God's chosen one has God's Spirit, and it is mankind, whose spirit is imprisoned in rebellion and self-centredness, that is liberated, and brought to life. And now set free, is it not our desire to "*... be holy, for I [that is, God] am holy ...*"? As we saw in chapter 1 where Peter quotes a speech of Moses in Leviticus, given him by God, adding, "*I am the LORD [Yahweh] who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.*"⁶ In other words, I rescued you; therefore, act out your rescue in your redeemed lives. The greatest rescue of all time, as Jews have always viewed the Exodus. But we know that there is an even greater, the greatest, rescue of all time, effective for all time, worked for us by Christ in his passion and resurrection ['made alive in the Spirit'].

God is a God who acts. Christ's preaching ministry was not just what he said. Jesus *said*, "*I must preach the good news ...*". And His ministry was also what He *did*. The people said, "*What is this Word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits ...*".

God's Patience

It might be puzzling to see Peter bring Noah into this passage. But let's think. Noah is the first person in the Bible to be labelled as righteous, unblemished in his generation (Genesis 6:9). Further, his name, pronounced something like Nowach [as little more than one syllable] in Hebrew, actually means *rescue* or *relief* or *rest*, that is, rest in the sense of deliverance from strife (Genesis 5:29). I'd like to quote Charles Dickens again, the very last sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities*, set in the French revolution; the Englishman Sidney Carton climbs up on to the scaffold to lose his head to the guillotine, taking the place of the French aristocrat who was the actual condemned man, and says (to himself), '*... it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.*' That is the kind of *rest* specified in the Bible, our final destiny. And we notice that in the flood narrative in Genesis 6 to 9, Noah never speaks a word, unlike Russell Crowe acting the part in the 2014 movie, who says a very great deal indeed. That Noah is not the Bible's Noah. Noah says nothing. He obeys. Note, Jesus also was silent (Isaiah 42:2, '*He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,*' and 53:7, '*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.*'), and was obedient, Luke 22:42, '*Not my will, but yours*'. God is in control of the entire flood story. Remember, who was it who shut

⁶ Leviticus 11:44-45, '*For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.*'⁴⁵
For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.' Also Leviticus 20:26, '*You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.*' See also Deuteronomy 7:6, '*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.*'

the door of the ark? *'Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him ...'*, then ten verses later, *'... And the LORD shut him in.'* Genesis 7:5,15. God 'shut Jesus in', too, to his dying and rising experience of the cross and resurrection, like Noah. And at the very apex of the tale, when the floods have ceased rising, then begin to subside, we read, 'And God remembered Noah', Genesis 8:1. That's not to say God forgot him, rather, God had Noah in mind. Noah in a sense was rescued by going through a dying and rising experience which is the allusion to baptism here where the water signifies not just the spiritual cleansing as in *"an appeal to God for a good conscience"*, or a righteous, moral, mental frame, but also a dying to sin and rising to new life.

God waits patiently now as then. A couple of weeks ago I was reminded of Holman Hunt's famous painting, *The Light of the World*, depicting Jesus (in fine robes and a crown, that is, the glorified King at God's right hand) knocking at an overgrown door that has no outside handle. It can only be opened from the inside and the ivy entangling the door suggests that it has not been opened in a long time. God is waiting patiently. Revelation 3:20-21, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."* Is God waiting patiently, even now, for me to get rid of something in my life that is not lined up with His ways?

Christ's journey

Our short passage today sits within Peter's writing about suffering for the gospel. He hasn't gone down a side-track. These few verses follow Christ's earthly journey, the purpose of which was to come in order to bring the gospel to mankind. He came and preached. He suffered death. He rose again. He went to sit at God's right hand. The four-fold ministry which, all together, were necessary for mankind's salvation, the greatest rescue of all time. In His suffering He took our sin. His rising again wins a victory. His ascension completes His mission and allows us also to share in His glory at the last day. Permit me to finish by reading the words of a four-verse song, one that you won't know. It describes the four phases of Christ's earthly journey, and how we respond. The first verse – He came. The last verse – His return journey. Please think how this applies to you. Let this be a prayer to end.

I want to tell somebody what Jesus did for me;
He came to earth as man, you know, that's what He did for me.
He came to earth as man, He did, to show to me the way
That I must tread along my road, tomorrow and today.

[Refrain after each verse].

I want to tell somebody what Jesus did for me;
He died upon the cross, you know, that's what He did for me.
He died upon the cross, He did, to take away my sin,
And open up the gate to heaven, that I might enter in.

I want to tell somebody what Jesus did for me;
He rose up from the grave, you know, that's what He did for me.
He rose up from the grave, He did, to win a victory
Over sin and death and hell, and every curse that's thrown at me.

I want to tell somebody what Jesus did for me;
He went up into heaven, you know, that's what He did for me,
He went up into heaven, He did, to sit at God's right hand,
And keep a place right there for me beside the great I Am.

So will I follow Him now as I walk along my way?
Will I follow Him more than yesterday?
For Jesus is my Life, He is my Truth, He is my Way,
And that is why I'll follow Him, tomorrow and today.