

## Trinity VIII, 2018

*Jeremiah 23:1-6; 1 Peter 2:18-25; Mark 6:30-34, 53-end.*

### The Shepherd and Guardian of your Souls

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*Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle, but also the harsh.*

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters. Put up with the beatings, the humiliation, put up with being owned by another person. It is to your credit, says 1 Peter, to soak it all up, to endure pain when suffering unjustly. Don’t rise up. Don’t fight back, don’t strike, don’t even run away, don’t *anything* .... Just soak it up.

How crushingly disappointing, you might think. Especially after your hopes had been raised by Jeremiah 23, our Old Testament reading. All that talk of shepherds, you see, was really about kings – and God was quite clearly saying that Israel’s kings to date had been a bad lot, and that one day soon he would raise up a real one, a good one, a true Shepherd, who would deal wisely, and bring justice and righteousness to the land. Things would be good in *his* Kingdom. There would be no beatings, no injustice, no humiliation. There would be no slaves. That’s what the Good Shepherd would bring. And that, of course, is what people thought was beginning to happen in Jesus. We catch something of the excitement, the buzz of hope, in Mark’s Gospel. Bring out your sick, bring out your weak, freedom is coming, the Shepherd is here. Just touch the fringe of his cloak, we will all be made well!

And all that excitement then settles down into the dull sobriety, the passivity, of 1 Peter, written just a few decades later to the early Christians. Slaves, obey your masters. Accept your lot. Nothing’s changing anytime soon. Just suck it up.

So why does Peter say that?

One answer is what you might call the *realpolitik* answer. The church had to win approval in the Roman Empire. It couldn’t be as radical as Jesus. It couldn’t be a revolution. It had to be socially conservative, and non-threatening. Pay your taxes, honour the Emperor, wives obey your husbands, slaves obey your masters, even the bad ones – it’s all there in 1 Peter 2.

There is probably a certain amount of truth in that explanation. 1 Peter says what it says because the church lost its nerve, and too quickly just became like the world around it. Maybe.

However, there's a wiser and truer answer as well. And it needs to be carefully stated, because it is so easy to get wrong and to abuse, but it's still wise and true. It's this:

Your desire for justice, for freedom, for a world without whips and beatings, may be a good thing – but it is also a very, very dangerous thing.

Because what will happen when you throw off the chains? You think there'll be a world of justice and peace. But actually, it's just as likely .... maybe even more likely ... to be just more violence. There will still be whips and beatings. Maybe this time you'll be on the giving end, not the receiving, but it's the same brutal old world. It's the French Revolution with its Reign of Terror, it's the Bolsheviks murdering their way across Russia. Freedom, justice and peace don't last very long as ideals. Human nature, you see, is so damaged, so corrupted, that much of the time when we try to build brave new worlds, the same old poison is still there in the heart, wrecking it all.

So Christianity traditionally has said, you should be very careful about casting off chains. It's a fantasy to think that the only thing wrong with the world is unjust social systems, that if only you could abolish slavery, or the class-system, or aristocracy, or Communism that everything would be OK. Everything would not be OK, because the poison isn't just in the structures, it's in the people. It's in *you*.

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So what is? 1 Peter is really clear. It's the Cross. It is Jesus of Nazareth, but not just radical Jesus the King of Galilee, the one who the crowds rushed out to in excitement – no, Jesus of Nazareth stretched out on the Cross. It's there, says Peter, and says the whole Christian

tradition, it's there that Jesus really dealt with what's at the heart of our problems. It's there that he showed what it was to live a life which is utterly without ego, utterly without resentment, utterly without violence – a life which was able to take all the darkness and horror and violence and not want to pay it back, a life which was total and utter love.

And he not only showed it, says the Gospel, but he opened it up. He made that life something which could breathe itself into our lives, fill our lives, make our lives like itself. That's supremely why he is the Good Shepherd. Our lives, left to themselves, my goodness they need the chains. They are full of darkness and chaos, of fightings within, of fears without. Of stuff we cannot control, which threatens to overwhelm us, which unchained would destroy the world. But, thank God, our lives *are not left to themselves*. *Our lives are not left to themselves*. They are met by this life, by this death, by this man on his Cross, this event of total and utter love. And that love, we trust, pours into us and makes us like Him. That's what the Eucharist is all about. It's why we eat his body, and drink his blood.

And one day, our faith is, this power will sweep through all creation. This power which renounces power, which gives up all desire to conquer, to dominate, to consume. The power which really will end the beatings, end the humiliations, end the slavery. Which will not just change who is doing them, but *end* them, end them forever and for everyone. That's the power of Jesus, to whom we give thanks and praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.

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