

## First Peter



1 Peter 1.21 "Through (Jesus) you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and (your) hope are (now) set on God."

As you may have noticed last Sunday, the second Reading this year for the Season of Easter will each week be from the so-called First Epistle of St. Peter, a part of the collection of Epistles in the New Testament ascribed to Jesus' Apostles; two supposed letters from St. Peter, three from St. John,

thirteen from St. Paul, one from St. James and one from St. Jude, the brothers of Jesus, and finally the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews. These letters are an important witness for us about the early Church.

So, what then do these Apostolic Epistles tell us about the life of Jesus, about what Jesus really did or did not do, and what he said, and how the early Christian congregations interpreted that, which as an early Church historian is my real interest. And what is so very remarkable to me is that if one reads the supposed early letters of Paul, and John, and Peter, and James and Jude, well known friends and followers of Jesus, they don't tell us anything about the life of Jesus at all. There are no stories or references, for instance, to the Virgin Birth or to the stories of the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' parents are never mentioned at, though Paul notes that Jesus was "born of a woman"! Similarly, any sayings of Jesus are almost entirely absent from the Apostolic Epistles, and there is oddly no mention or allusion to Jesus' famous parables in the rest of the New Testament outside the first three Gospels. Similarly, there are no stories or references to Jesus' miracles in the Apostolic Epistles, except for one brief general reference to them in Hebrews (2.3).

So while, sadly, these Apostolic Epistles really don't tell us much about the life of Jesus, they do provide invaluable

insight into the life of the early church, about how the early Christian congregations included both Jews and Gentiles, and how they had disputes with one another about things like whether circumcision was obligatory or not for new male Christian converts, or whether the serving of kosher food was required at their Sunday Eucharistic meals they had together. These congregations also included men and women, freemen and slaves, rich and poor, and there were some significant disputes between these social classes. Moreover, there are even more serious disputes recorded between Christians and the larger Jewish community, who took offense at Christians calling Jesus the Messiah and for not supporting Jewish attempts to overthrow Roman control in the Holy Land.

So, in particular, what then does the so-called First Epistle of St. Peter really tell us about Christians and the struggles of the early Church? The authorship of this Epistle has traditionally been attributed to the Apostle Peter because it bears his name and identifies him as its author in its very first verse, which reads: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood." Interestingly, those verses were skipped in the Reading last week. And that may be

because the consensus among Biblical scholars is that St. Peter, the Apostle most likely did not write this letter.

Why do they think that? Well, first of all, both the Apostles John and Peter are identified as "illiterate" in Acts 4.13, that is, that they couldn't read or write, which is the literal meaning of the actual Greek word most often now translated in English more softly as simply "uneducated." Since about only 10% of the people in Galilee at that time were thought to be able to read and write, it would not be surprising that Peter was illiterate. Of course, he could have hired a scribe to write down his words, and sure enough in chapter 5, verse 12, at the end of this Epistle, we read "Through Silvanus (cf. 1 Thes.1.1), whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings . . . Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

The reference to "Babylon" here in this epistle is generally thought to suggest that the letter was written from Rome, where Peter, not surprisingly, was once a leading member, and that identification of Rome with Babylon is also seen in the so-called Revelation of St. John the Divine (17.5-6), but that association of Rome with Babylon only came about after the

destruction of the Temple in the year 70 of the Common Era, and St. Peter and St. Paul are believed to have been martyred before that time in a localized persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero in Rome, between 64-67 C.E. before the identification of Babylon with Rome, before Rome had destroyed the Second Temple the way Babylon had destroyed the first. Since the letter also identifies its recipients in Asia Minor who are also suffering under persecution, it is thought by many that the letter was most likely written during the reign of the Emperor Domitian in year 81 C.E., which is when Christian persecution became more widespread in the Roman Empire, persecution that is known to have included Asia Minor.

If so, then this Epistle is an example of pseudepigraphy, an ancient practice of writing something in someone else's name, often one's inspiring leader, a bit like Plato writing the dialogues of Socrates, his teacher. The early Church and even our New Testament contain quite a few books with pseudonymous titles. For example, of the thirteen so-called Letters of St. Paul in our Bible, only 7 are confidently ascribed to the Apostle by scholars.

Still the First Epistle of St. Peter is a very important and valuable expression of the Christian tradition at Rome by Christians associated with Peter later in the first century, and it suggests continuing problems between the Jewish and Gentile

Christians. Remember, Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome, likely about 49 C.E., due to ongoing civil disturbances attributed to one "Chrestus," suggesting the disputes are over the arrival of Christianity into the Imperial capital. The historian Suetonius records that expulsion, and it is corroborated by the biblical account in Acts 18:2.

Some scholars believe that the recipients of the First Epistle of St. Peter were experiencing suffering more social in nature, rather than political, specifically in the simple form of verbal derision. Christians are "maligned", and "reviled" (2.12, 3.16; 4.14) according to the letter. Outsiders recognize the Christian "name" as offensive (4.14, 16). Other biblical scholars note that the author explicitly urges the addressees to respect authority and even honor the emperor, strongly suggesting that they were unlikely to be suffering from official Roman persecution. It is significant to some that the author notes that "your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering", indicating suffering that is global in scope.

Some scholars go further and suggest that the possible context for 1 Peter is the known trials and executions of Christians in the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus under the magistrate Pliny the Younger. Scholars who support this theory believe that a famous letter from Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

concerning his trials of Christians reflects the very situation faced by the addressees of this epistle. In Pliny's letter, written in 112 C.E., he asks Trajan if the accused Christians brought before him should be punished based solely on the name 'Christian' alone, or for crimes associated just with that name. Moreover, they interpret the exhortation to defend one's faith "with gentleness and reverence" in the epistle as a response to Pliny executing Christians for the obstinate manner in which they professed to be Christians. Next week's reading begins with the verse: "It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly" (2.19). In two weeks time, you will hear from the author, "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated" (3.14). And three weeks later you will hear, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you" (4.12).

In summary, the early disputes between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early church, evidenced in Paul's early letters, seems to have continued for some time, into the early second century even, and larger disputes between the Jewish community and the Christian community persist. And these unsettling disputes were beginning to get noticed by annoyed Roman officials like Claudius and Pliny, who wanted to keep the peace. These conflicts seem to continue in the early Church

until after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE), which was the last and most devastating of three major Jewish rebellions against the Roman Empire. The rebels, led by Simon bar Kokhba, overthrew Rome and founded an independent Jewish state that endured for more than three years before being crushed by Emperor's armies. The revolt's suppression resulted in the near-total depopulation of Judea proper. Jews were forbidden under penalty of death thereafter from entering the ruins around the city of Jerusalem, and there were also mass killings, widespread enslavement, and displacement of the Jews. Because the non-violent Christian congregations generally did not support this Revolt, Jewish participation in the church declined significantly thereafter, and the First Epistle of St. Peter may give us clear insight into how and when that split finally occurred. Amen.