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Steadfast in Faith (1 Peter 4.12-16, 5.6-11)

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Apostasy was a big issue for the first few generations of Christian believers, who suffered periodic bouts of persecution under successive Roman emperors. Christians were at times pressured to make sacrifices to the Roman gods and so, effectively, to renounce their faith. During such ‘fiery ordeals’, some were martyred. But as theologian Ben Myers notes: ‘martyrdom was always the exception’. Countless frightened Christians, including many clergy, did sacrifice to the gods, and the question of how the church was subsequently to relate to these apostates created a pastoral crisis for many congregations. Could they be forgiven? Did they need to be re-baptised, and so on?¹

Well, the recipients of 1 Peter were not perhaps suffering such violent persecution as that, but they were certainly under pressure from their surrounding culture. Accordingly, the letter exhorts them not to provoke any deserved punishment: ‘let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker’ (4.9), while also not to betray their allegiance to Christ: ‘Yet, if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name’ (4.10). And the question of right relationship of believers to surrounding culture remains often complex. There’s still a danger of confusing lawful punishment with persecution – as happens at times in Australia when some Christians claim they’re being persecuted, merely for being held to account by worldly authorities for such things as covering up abuse, practicing employment discrimination or preaching intolerance. Yet at the same time, there are other forms of worldly pressure that faith requires us to resist.

¹ Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), pp.113-114.

So what does it look like to live as Christians and citizens in *our* secular society? How does a commitment to be informed by the virtues we've been exploring over past weeks – virtues of faith, hope and love, generosity, humility and justice – play out in the messy and (what can feel like) compromising contexts of our institutional or commercial culture? To what gods are we asked to make sacrifices? In what ways might we be acting as apostates, traitors to our faith? I know these are questions some in our Benedictus community experience acutely in relation to their work and participation in institutional contexts.

Sometimes it can help to focus the issue by means of an 'obvious' case. 'There are', says Rowan Williams, 'forms of human belonging which ... are manifestly at odds with the Kingdom'. The example he gives is that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his struggle with his citizenship in the Third Reich. Williams notes that things may get to the point where someone's 'most important Christian service to [their] nation may be resistance, active or passive – a calling of their community to account in the name of a wider human fellowship'. This example, he says, is almost a cliché, but it highlights the fact that 'any racial group or language group or sovereign state whose policy or programme it is to pursue its interest at the direct cost of others has no claim on the Christian's loyalty in itself'.

That sounds right. But no human state, institution or economic system is perfect. Where a collective is systematically murderous or genocidal, that's one kind of example. But what if we belong (as we do) to a nation that is in certain respects admirable, committed in broad terms to the rule of law and the well-being of at least a majority of its citizens, and is yet in other respects systematically oppressive, abusive and irresponsible? Our Australian government cruelly and indefinitely detains asylum seekers arriving by boat and economically punishes even those who are grudgingly accepted as refugees, in contravention of international law and as a matter of deliberate policy; it persistently fails to act in accord with key environmental protections and emissions reduction commitments. Both instances of pursuing perceived national (or ideological) interest at the direct cost of others. I

have friends who work or have worked in the bureaucracies whose task is to enact these policies, and all of us benefit from other aspects of the government's activities. How do we live in the midst of this? What is the Christian response?

There are no final 'answers' here – but let me sketch what I believe are some touchstones that leave us with some capacity to engage the complexity of our situation, rather than being left with a choice between distancing ourselves entirely from any compromising involvement (the martyrdom option) or from simply capitulating to the demands of the world.

The first touchstone concerns the need to distinguish between faithfulness and innocence. I've cited in other contexts words of theologian Andrew Shanks, which for me really help to focus this issue. In a book intriguingly entitled *Against Innocence*, Shanks has pointed out that when it comes to doing the 'right' thing, two motives are, in most of us, deeply intertwined. There is the genuine desire to do justice; and there is the desire to be justified, to be assured of our innocence. This second desire, he says, gets in the way of the first. It makes our ethical responses self-referencing, self-conscious. It distracts us and, as he says, turns 'us away from the authentic desire to be just'. Instead of being genuinely other-directed, our concern is subtly but unmistakably self-centred.

There may be occasions when something diverts from godly action to such an extent that it *must be* refused. But there may be other occasions when a refusal to compromise is itself a form of bad faith – more about the desire to maintain my own innocence or purity than anything else. Often it's not easy to tell the difference, and you can see how this kind of dilemma is intrinsic to much of our political, institutional and organisational life – where the need to negotiate with competing conceptions of the good, or to compromise for the sake of small gains confronts us daily. I've suggested that holiness of life, Christian virtue, is about making visible the nature of God and participating in the divine action to give and restore life. But, quoting Williams again, 'in a world where circumstances oblige us to choose between more and less damaging (and therefore, in respect of God, more and less opaque) options',

this means there is an inescapably tragic dimension to our action in the world. This is not something to be complacent about – as if it lets us off the hook. Nevertheless, perhaps there are times when it's only as I give up implicit pre-occupation with my own innocence that space is created faithfully to participate with others, to discern the particulars of a situation and discover my responsibility in relation to it.

This brings us to the second and related touchstone – which is 'responsibility'. For Bonhoeffer, it is the willingness to be 'responsible' that is the cornerstone of Christian ethics. Responsible as in responsive – to God and to the reality of the world. Responsible as in answerable, personally accountable. Bonhoeffer maintained that we are not guaranteed of doing good by following a moral system – by conforming our behaviour to a pre-determined set of principles, rules, values or customs. This is because to give ourselves and our actions over to any such system is to outsource our responsibility, our answerability to the livingness of God's call and the livingness of the world. One consequence of this call to responsibility is thus the built-in moral vulnerability of Christian life. 'Those who act on the basis of ideology consider themselves justified by their idea', he said. 'Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God's grace and judgement'.

The key feature of responsible action is, however, that it is concrete and limited. 'Action in accord with reality is limited by our creatureliness', he writes. 'We do not create the conditions for our action but find ourselves already placed within them. In our action we are bound by certain limitations from both the past and the future that cannot be leaped over'. This is at one level a relief – it turns out I'm not the Messiah! But the question then becomes: what is our actual, concrete responsibility, here and now? I can spend a lot of energy railing against injustice in general, and how 'the system' is failing the poor and the planet, and how someone should do something about it. I can be righteously indignant or helplessly overwhelmed, and usually both. But this general moral concern can serve to distract me from truly giving myself to the particular responsibilities that are mine. It can distract me from humbly participating in the larger reconciling work of God, which

may include at times suffering a sense of the insufficiency and inadequacy of my contribution. The touchstone of responsibility focuses on our concrete responsibility. Given who God is, given how we are actually situated in life, given our particular gifts and call, what is ours to do? What can you be and what will you be responsible for?

A third and final touchstone that I think helps orient us for participation in the life of the world is the significance of holy imagination and creativity. Faithfulness involves keeping alive within us the imagination and perspective of the kingdom. Christians have a particular story to tell about who we are and how we are together called to be, and this may then be expressed in huge range of ways – through artistic expression, in forms of community gathering, in the hosting of spaces for rest and renewal, in the cultivation of particular kinds of conversation or social ecology in our workplaces, or in creating opportunities for dialogue that spark new possibilities for others. This is the prophetic imagination of which biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, and learning how to speak and live prophetically in the circumstances we're placed keeps us nourished by and true to the grace we have received.

The writer of 1 Peter seemed acutely conscious of the ways in which Christians in first century Asia Minor could be drawn away from the vital and transformative practice of their faith. Fearing suffering, hostility and rejection, or tending to complacency and overly close conformity to the society around them, there were many ways they could lapse. And their situation is perhaps not so different from our own. How then do we stay true? Peter urged his readers on the one hand to look to God: 'Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you'; and at the same time, to guard against their own susceptibility: 'Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour'. In the messy and complex circumstances of our world, resisting the temptation to betray our call might mean making a difficult compromise; at other times, it will mean naming the inconvenient truth in a meeting or ministerial briefing, whether or not it will make a difference. Refusing to sacrifice to

the gods might mean not making it easy for an unjust 'system' to justify its actions to itself, or to forget the cost of a particular decision. This takes courage. And as for the community of 1 Peter, to sustain our courage we need the fellowship of our community and commitment to the practices that steady our faith in the one who promises always to 'restore, support, strengthen and establish' us. May we be true. Amen