

On the First Letter of Peter (6)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 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. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11



As the Apostle Peter gathers his reflections together near the end of this letter, it is on the Glory of the risen and ascended Christ that his focus rests. It is a Glory that rests also on us too, through our faith in the resurrection and through our Baptism – through our reflection on the words of God which have permeated the whole of the letter, including a text from the Psalms which Peter cited several chapters earlier, ‘*if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*’ Here is the text of the Psalm itself, to put it in context:

*I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.*

*Look to him and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.
The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and delivers them.
O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.*

Psalm 34.4-8; cf 1 Peter 2.3

This sense of being bathed and renewed in the spirit of 'glory' – reflecting the *image and likeness of God* made new within us – is what spares the whole letter from the despondency which might otherwise attach to a text which refers so consistently to the *ongoing trials* which face those of us who seek to follow the call of Christ. Instead, we can *face* them, because we have *beheld the Glory of God* and are *held in God's embrace*.

None of this will make us proud or self-satisfied. Rather, it is the spirit of *humility* which will permeate us as the *light of Christ* fills whatever space is opened up within us by the conversion of our ego and our sense of self-dependence and assertiveness of will. Here again the Apostle Peter pre-empted the lessons of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who learn know that *pride* – especially spiritual pride – is the most dangerous of the vices or 'passions', and that *humility* is the strongest of the remedies against it.

Neither he nor they mean the false humility of self-punishment or abject wretchedness, which are in themselves a distorted kind of *self-flattery* – in this instance the self-flattery that we are especially *wicked*. Most of us are really more *ordinary* than that – more like each other (including those whom we disdain) than we usually want to admit. Instead, the humility which becomes the basis of genuine virtue, as the Christian moral tradition understands it, is about perfect self-recognition, neither over- nor under-inflated. It acknowledges our failings and our weaknesses, without letting them paralyse us; it allows for the mercy of God to make good what is defective within us; and, whenever it falters and falls, it picks itself up and starts again. Slowly our ego is remoulded and filled with a reflection of the Glory of God, and the fruits of our Baptism, made good in the Resurrection of Christ, guide us back home in him. Alleluia. Amen.

The image shows an icon of Christ in Glory by the Russian iconographer, Andrei Rublev (c1360-c1430)