

## On the First Letter of Peter (1)

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* 1 Peter 1.3-9



The Apostle Peter describes the work of God within us – the effects of a true faith – as being like the ‘refinement of gold in the fire’. It is a hugely evocative description of the means by which we are renewed in the image and likeness of God (cf Genesis 1.26-27) – an image which holds together both

*hope* and the knowledge that much of our experience will continue to be *challenging*. We may indeed have yet to ‘suffer various trials’, but there is in the Apostle’s words a confidence and robustness of spirit which is filled with both hope and with joy. These are the effects within us of faith in the resurrection.

The resurrection does not mean that everything difficult has suddenly been taken away from us. Rather, it is the source of *resilience* in the face of the challenges, until the work of God is made complete and the final day arrives – still far distant from us – when *all things are made new* (cf Revelation 21.5). No longer overwhelmed by the darkness of the world – including the darkness which remains hidden deep within our own selves

– we can now face this darkness confidently and assertively because we have *seen the light*. And that light *shines in the darkness*, and it can never be extinguished (cf John 1.5).

Teresa of Avila expresses something similar when she says, seemingly in paradox, that ‘when the soul is *strong* God will lead it into the *desert*.’ We had thought that spiritual strength would mean that we might now be free of the challenges of the ‘desert’, the place of aridness and testing. What Teresa means, of course, is that we shall be tested and refined and made all the more strong – stretched and made robust by the experience of the desert, in which only those who are strong will survive and flourish. By being stretched and made more resilient, we shall be of more use to God in the world; we shall be able to go – as Jesus does when he returns after his Baptism from the desert to the city – and proclaim:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour* (Luke 4.18-19, citing Isaiah 61.1-2).

*This* is the work which will come into effect as a result of the resurrection – a work in which we see the fruits also of Pentecost, which completes the Easter celebrations at the end of the fifty days. This is the means by which the renewal of the face of the earth will begin to be made clear – and we become active participants in the process, empowered by the faith of the resurrection itself. We shall be sustained by hope and joy.

Reflecting a bit like Teresa of Avila, on the process of testing and refinement, like gold in the fire, St Silouan of Mount Athos understood himself to have been given an even starker calling by the Spirit of God – to go down, as it were, in his mind into *hell* (into the place of the deepest and bleakest darkness), but to *despair not*. Knowing that in his death and resurrection Jesus Christ has filled even the remotest and most desolate places with the Presence of God, Silouan was prompted to trust that there is no place, no circumstance, no situation which we need fear, but, rather, we may traverse them ourselves, confident that Christ has already illuminated the path back into the embrace of God. We may tread the dark path for the sake of those who are still stuck on it, that they may yet be gathered back into the hope and the joy of the resurrection. May it be so. Alleluia.