

On the First Letter of Peter (5)

Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 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, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. 1 Peter 3.13-end



The Apostle Peter assumes that our faith will be quietly confident in the face of questioning, in the face of challenges of different kinds. It will not be aggressive or overbearing, but marked by 'gentleness' and 'reverence'. That is to say, he assumes that we shall have a dignified self-possession which is unruffled when we face any time of trial. There are echoes here of the moral focus of the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7) and especially the specific virtues commended in the *Beatitudes* at its start: poverty of spirit, mournfulness (that is, lament at the state of a broken and fallen world), meekness, hunger and thirst for what is right, the spirit of mercy, purity of heart, and a commitment to peace. Later in the sermon, Jesus summarises all of this in terms of a readiness to be people of *forgiveness* (not least against those who wrong us) – the fulfilment of what the Bible means by 'mercy'.

The Apostle Peter understands these virtues to be the fruit of our faith in the resurrection: they become the source of 'good conduct' and a 'clear conscience', picking up again the theme from earlier in the letter where Peter compares the effect of faith with the removal of our *shame*. Instead, we know that in Christ's death and resurrection we are *washed clean*.

What follows is an eloquent meditation on *Baptism*, the reorientation of our values and pattern of life when we turn from sin and darkness towards the Glory of the Resurrection in which all things may yet be made new. Let us pay attention to Peter's understanding of this process of conversion and renewal within us.

Baptism is less the 'removal of dirt' from us than it is an 'appeal to God for a good conscience', a reflection of God's *patience* towards us. We *are* washed and made clean – forgiven by God: but the emphasis here is more on the abundantly *positive* effects which can follow from this than on the negative effects from which it saves us. As elsewhere in the letter, the Apostle Peter articulates a faith which is positive and radiant and full of the Glory of God – that Glory which he had witnessed on Mount Tabor in the Transfiguration of Jesus (cf Matthew 17.1-8; Mark 9.2-9; Luke 9.28-36 – which specifies that 'they saw his *glory*', verse 32). The effect on the Apostle *Peter* of this disclosure of Christ's Glory – a pre-emption of the Resurrection itself – is described in one the letters ascribed to him:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

2 Peter 1.16-18

It is this encounter with what he himself calls a 'Majestic Glory' which, surely, is the source of the radical transformation in him from someone rather cowardly on the eve of Good Friday, denying Christ three times, to the confident and eloquent preacher whom we encounter in the Acts of the Apostles and in these two letters attributed to Peter himself, filled with radiancy and grace. May these be among the qualities entrusted also to us as we behold and reflect upon the Resurrection of the Lord.

The image shows the modern font in Salisbury Cathedral, filled with water in perpetual motion.