

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Second Sunday of Easter, Year A
May 1, 2011

IF THOU BUT SUFFER GOD TO GUIDE THEE (1 Peter 1:3-9)
Howard Bowlin+

Several years ago, I attended a continuing education event where I was trained and certified to administer a pastoral care program called “Stephen Ministries.” One of the presenters was a man who was a Clinical Social Worker. His task was to work with us on effective ways to minister to persons with mental health issues. He was a superb teacher: he knew his material, he was appropriately witty, and he had a great “podium presence.” We all thought he was terrific.

He was also an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. After years of social work, counseling others, and teaching, he came to the self-understanding that he wanted to return to the vocation of parish minister. So he resigned his various positions and was called as pastor of a church in western Tennessee. Things went well—until the tornados of 2008 in that part of the state. The town where he served was struck. He and the congregation opened up the church to the community as a shelter.

During the aftermath of the storms, he, his wife, and their two children went out in the family minivan to buy more provisions for the hungry and homeless at the church. As they were returning home, they got caught in a traffic tie-up on I-40. They were last in a long line of stopped vehicles when a semi came up on the line of traffic. The driver was unable to stop and rammed into their van. The pastor, his wife, and their two children were killed instantly. Some said: “What’s the point? So much for trying to be good and helpful to others. So much for prayer.”

A sixteen-year-old boy came from a good family. His family had raised him well. But he didn’t want it. He got into drugs. He got into trouble at school and with the police. His family sought help for him; they sought help for the whole family. His church prayed for him and supported him. But the boy didn’t buy it—none of it. One night he shot himself to death. Some said: “What’s the point? So much for trying to be good and helpful to others. So much for prayer.”

Another sixteen-year-old boy also came from a good family. He was quite the scholar—had been first in his class for as long as anyone could remember. At the beginning of his senior year in high school he started feeling weak. A trip to the doctor with the anticipated diagnosis of “mono” or something like it turned into a nightmare. He had leukemia and needed a bone marrow transplant. His church prayed for him and supported him. Even with missing a lot of school for treatments, he managed to graduate second in his class. A donor was found and the transplant took place. It was too late. Shortly after his nineteenth birthday, he died. Some said: “What’s the point? So much for trying to be good and helpful to others. So much for prayer.”

Three true stories; two occurred where I was the family’s priest. The questions asked are always the same: “What’s the point? So much for trying to be good and helpful to others. So much for prayer.”

I don't know whether you've ever faced such situations in your life, or perhaps in your family's life. Chances are that there are several among us who have. Those of us who have know that the emotions are real. So are the questions, not matter how much "faith" we think we possess.

So what does this morning's Epistle reading have to say to us who face life's trauma's and tragedies? Consider this phrase, "You, who are being protected by the power of God, through faith . . ." What about Peter's assertion that we are *protected by the power of God*, through faith? Peter himself found this out soon enough that this doesn't always apply in the physical world. Tradition has it that he was crucified upside down during the persecution of the mad emperor Nero.

Others of Jesus' closest followers discovered the same lesson. Paul died in prison, executed in the same persecution as Peter. So far as we know, none but one of the apostles died in bed. Tradition has it that, with the possible exception of John, all died violent martyrs' deaths. How do we counterbalance what we know to be demonstrably true in the physical world with the promise inherent in Holy Scripture, particularly these words attributed to Saint Peter?

Faith strengthens us. People are able to do all sorts of things as a result of religious faith which they could not otherwise do. Remember Saint Paul's assertion elsewhere? "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

In the early days of the Salvation Army, the attacks upon its soldiers by mob violence and the misrepresentation of its motives in the public press must have been hard to bear for General William Booth, its founder. His son, Bramwell Smith, recalled: "When I went to my father, perhaps with some infamous newspaper attack, and in my indignation have said, 'This is really more than we can stand,' my father has replied, 'Bramwell, fifty years hence it will matter little indeed how these people treated us; it will matter a great deal how we dealt with the work of God.'"¹ Faith strengthens us.

Then, *faith guides us.* Several years ago, the newspapers ran a story about a desperate prisoner in Australia who successfully carried out his plan to escape from the county jail. He managed to do this by crawling under a delivery truck parked at the jail receiving dock. As he hung on for dear life to the truck's undercarriage, the vehicle passed through the prison gates and drove down the main highway. Twenty minutes later, the truck began to slow down. When it came to a complete stop, the prisoner let go of his grip, dropped to the ground, and rolled out to freedom—only to discover that he was now inside the walls of the provincial prison, five miles down the road from the county jail he'd just come from.²

Do you sometimes think that life is like that? We get to a point where we feel imprisoned by our fears and anxieties and guilt feelings. They wall us in emotionally and spiritually, and we desperately seek a way out. We try one escape route after another, only to discover that we're just moving ourselves from one prison to another. But faith guides us. As the old hymn states the matter, "If thou but suffer God to guide thee, and hope in

¹IS, 0447.

²TPIS, 2133.

him through all thy ways, God will give strength, what e'er betide thee, and bear thee through the evil days."³

Finally, *faith saves us*. That is Peter's main point in our reading. Faith doesn't protect us from earthly harm. Good, devout people become ill, die. However, Peter's assurance of life after death enables people of faith to believe that something after this life will make sense of all that befalls us in the world today.

In 1955, The Cambridge Humanist Society was formed at Cambridge University in England. Sir Julian Huxley explained that their purpose was to enable people to cope with their environment without resort to the idea that there is a God. He said that one hundred years hence, people would find it as hard to believe in God as they currently do to believe the world is flat.

A few years later, another distinguished man of science was asked to address the faculty of Cambridge. He opened his address with these words: "Before my lecture, I want to tell you something. I am a Christian. I was brought up in a Christian home with my brother, and the two of us were closest friends. We were both at the University together. My father and mother were deeply religious. My brother and I had no time for religion. We thought that religion was all right for old people, but we were scientists and we thought we had found our way through by what we were pleased to call 'scientific methods.'

"Then my brother was killed. My father and mother had resources. And with these resources they met the shattering loss. But I had no one. I had no resources at all. One night, brokenhearted, and with all my proud science in ruined uselessness at my feet, I knelt down. I did not know how to pray. I had scorned prayer, but I put out my hand—and I found it was grasped. I knew that someone was coming to my help and somehow I knew it was Christ. I have been a Christian ever since and no one, nothing, will take Christ from me any more."

"If thou but suffer God to guide thee, and hope in him through all thy ways, God will give strength, what e'er betide thee, and bear thee through the evil days. Who trusts in God's unchanging love builds on a rock that nought can move. Sing, pray, and keep his ways unswerving; so do thine own part faithfully, and trust his word, though undeserving; thou yet shalt find it true for thee; God never yet forsook in need the soul that trusted him indeed."⁴

Keep those words and reflections in mind as we continue living in this time of uncertainty and insanity in the world.

³*The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), 635.

⁴*The Hymnal 1982*, 635.