

John 14: 15-21/1 Peter 3: 13-22

1 Peter gives an answer that is as surprising as it is beautiful to a question that was raised by last week's story of Stephen. As you will no doubt remember, Stephen was the first Christian martyr – or the first Christian “witness” as the word “martyr” should be understood.

The question raised by this, is of course, what does it mean to be a witness, not only then but also today?

What does it mean to be a witness for Jesus Christ? Does it mean to be willing to die for Christ, as Stephen did? Does it mean to be ready to offer an apology for the Christian faith? Does it mean to defend the accuracy of the bible? Does it mean to live strictly according to certain biblical rules? Does it mean to defend and belong to a church? Or does it mean to simply know the difference between right and wrong as many people believe today.

The answer to this question, according to the first letter of Peter, is both beautiful and surprising. According to Peter, to be a witness for Jesus Christ means to be always prepared **to give an account of the hope that is in us**. (verse 15). In addition to this, it is added, “...and do this with gentleness and respect.”

To be a witness for Jesus Christ isn't about recruitment, is not about an excellent biblical knowledge, theological eloquence...it is in the first place to give an account of the **hope** that is in us or give a reason for the hope that we have, as other translations put it.

We live in a world where many people live in fear of what the future holds, where many people dread life more than death.

We live in a world where many people have surrendered the hope of a better future, the hope of a tomorrow without emptiness and loneliness. A world where people are too scared to love and be loved.

All of us have been in the church long enough to know that, in spite of all the good and noble things the church have done and still do – that nevertheless the church have failed many people over the years – by not witnessing to our hopes for humanity but constantly our deepest fears. By not witnessing to a love that is unconditional and new every day, but to a love that demands more than it is prepared to give.

Succumbing to the perpetual threat of moralism, the teaching of the church was often not so much “If you love me, you will obey me” but rather “I will love you only if you obey me”. And hence many people grow up with a fear of God; unable to give an account of the hope that is in them. Able only to give an account of what is demanded and expected of them.

Already a few decades ago, the Jewish rabbi, Abraham Heschel, had warned us:
“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeat. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by (moralism and) habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks

only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion-- its message becomes meaningless."

However, at this point one could also object, by saying: Is it not true that obedience to God is required of us? It is not true that Jesus said in John 14: "If you love me you will *obey* what I command." It not true that 1 Peter recalls that Jesus is said to have preached to spirits in prison, to those who have *disobeyed* God?

Yes, of course this is true, obedience to God has been expected from God's children ever since the time of Adam and Eve, long before the time of Noah.

Therefore it is indeed a very important word and even more important to find out what it means in the bible. In colloquial language "obedience" is for most people more or less "doing what someone else tells me to do." It is doing what I am instructed to do.

Both the Hebrew and Greek words which are usually translated with our English word "obedience" have a different meaning. The Hebrew word **shama** means to "listen intelligently" while the Greek word "**hupakouo**" is to "listen attentively". Rather "to do what you're told" both of them mean to "listen closely, to listen acutely".

When the NT says that Jesus was perfectly obedient to God it doesn't mean that Jesus followed every single word that God instructed him to do; instead it means that Jesus could sense perfectly what the Father wanted. It means that his hearing was perfectly tuned to the voice or the heart of the Father.

That is of course also where the Spirit of God comes in. The Holy Spirit is called the paraclete "parakletos" in Greek. It comes from the root "kaleo" which means 'to call'. In other words it is the Holy Spirit who calls out to us to listen closely, to pay close attention to God. Obedience is about hearing the voice calling out, listening to what the voice is saying. In short, it is not about mindless doing but about thoughtful listening.

We know this obedience is very important because we know that the Spirit's teaching is very different from contemporary wisdom. The voice of the Spirit is not simply the little voice of the conscience as so many people believe today. And it is especially not the voice of the conscience that does nothing else but to accuse us.

Writing about this difference of Holy Spirit's voice, the Dutch theologian, Oepke Noordmans, says:

"If we say: I am guilty, then the Spirit responds: You are righteous in the eyes of God. If we say: I am a sinner, then the Spirit says: you are holy. If we complain: I am a stranger, the Spirit says: you are a child of God, a loved and trusted member of his household. Often we understand that these names don't really fit us: but then, they are the pet names of a mother for her children."

Obedience is the way children listen to their mother. Obedience is being sensitive to the tone of love; it is following what God really wants, following and understanding more than instruction, but understanding and doing the will of God.

Perhaps the best example of this kind of listening we find in Alan Paton, the well known

South African author's book "*Ah, but your land is beautiful!*" In this he recalls an incident, which took place a few years after the introduction of apartheid as the official policy of the government. During this time an Afrikaner judge, Jan Christiaan Olivier, received an invitation by a black minister to come and visit his church. The minister wanted to show his parishioners that not all white people had turned against them.

On the evening of Maundy Thursday the judge went to the service and thus put his whole career in jeopardy. For this particular occasion the minister had organized a feet-washing ceremony and the judge was asked to take part in this. Without knowing it or without it being planned, it so happened that the woman whose feet he had to wash, was the black woman who also had been the servant in his house for more than 30 years. Everyone in the congregation was holding their breath when Judge Jan Christiaan Olivier knelt before Martha Fortuin. The story then continues:

"Then he took both her feet in his hands with gentleness, for they were no doubt tired of much serving, and he kissed them both. Then Martha Fortuin and many others in the Holy Church of Zion fell a-weeping".

Alan Paton added that this incident was reported by many papers and the judge was indeed taken off the bench for what he did.

To be able to give an account of the **hope** that is in us, one has to be obedient. One has to be more sensitive to the voice of God than to the all the competing voices. For it is the voice of God that creates hope, the voice of the Spirit that calls us to a different future – to a future we cannot even fathom ourselves.

Or in the very well known words of the Brazilian philosopher and theologian, Rubem Alves: *"Hope is to hear the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it."*

Obedience is about the ability to hear the sound, the music of hope. Discipleship is to dance to it.

About a fortnight ago I was walking around Circular Quay. In front of me walked a woman dressed in black, pushing a pram and looking as gloomy as the dress she wore. More or less at the place where the ferry passengers disembark, there was a man playing a saxophone. I was probably 20 metres or so away when he started playing a wonderful lively, rhythmic tune. When the woman in black reached him, she suddenly stopped and there while all the people were passing, started to dance.

Obedience is like that: it is a response that is not so much triggered by the power of discipline, but rather by the power of beauty. In this sense hope is to be overwhelmed by beauty: by the evocative beauty of a different kingdom, a new city and new world. We haven't created it; we can only witness to it.

In the movie "American Beauty" - which challenges a certain kind of 'artificial' beauty in American society, there is a truly beautiful scene of a young man, Ricky, video taping a plastic bag as it taken by the wind. He says:

"It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. And this bag was, like, dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. And that's the day I

knew there was this entire life behind things, and... this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever. ... Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it, like my heart's going to cave in."

As Christians we know that this force has a name: not the unknown God or a simply a benevolent force. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the resurrected Christ, the Lord is his Name.

And we come here, not only to worship him but to be reminded that this Lord, the triune God is indeed the deepest source of our hope.

Playwright Arthur Miller once wrote that his one-time wife, Marilyn Monroe, knew what it was like to be an orphan, to be abandoned. And her experience with that gave her an uncanny ability: according to Miller, whenever Marilyn entered a room, she was always able to pick out from the crowd those who had been orphans. There was just a certain look in the eyes of orphans that a fellow orphan could always detect at a glance. It was a glint of loneliness, perhaps, of fear, of wariness. Whatever it was, fellow orphans were able to look at one another and share a common bond of knowing and understanding. (scott hoezee)

The well-known German feminist theologian, **Dorothee Sölle**, also writes about her teaching experience at Union Seminary in New York. She then makes the following remarks about her stay in the city:

“You perpetually had the idea that you’re missing out on something. That people don’t seem to notice you nor are willing to listen to you. In this city you can be lonelier than on the most remote island.

On one occasion, I had to go to Harlem, to a predominantly black church, the Canaan Baptist church.”

She said that a few very sentimental hymns were animated by the beat of a small electronic organ. She continues: “There was sorrow in the eyes of the people, but despite this, the way that they sang: ‘There is power, there is power, there is power in the blood of the Lamb’ filled me with a hope and power which I thought had disappeared long ago.”

She said: “I started to cry and asked myself: Why do I cry?”

She said she realized that she had never experienced such comfort, fellowship and responsibility in any German congregation. It was as if everybody were crippled. As if everybody needed God so badly. But it was also as if He was really there and if they received the breath of life from his presence.