*“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.”*

One of the highlights of my lockdown week comes on a Sunday morning at 9.45am when I join the Sunday Club Zoom Meeting; seeing and hearing the children; able to chat to them and join in the programme planned by the wonderful Sunday Club staff. I invariably feel much brighter and more optimistic afterwards.

A couple of weeks ago the theme was *“God’s Wonderful World”* and the children did a Scavenger Hunt – running from their computers out into the garden for a succession of items. I joined in – from the top floor of the Manse - and it was the best workout I have had in years!

Another element of the programme that day was the challenge to take a selfie out in God’s wonderful world and the following week we had a great collage of lovely pictures. Inspired by this I took my smartphone when we went walking that afternoon. I took a shot which I am really pleased with and posted it on the Church Facebook page and website. You will be relieved to find that I did not spoil the glorious view by making it a selfie!

Today’s reading from 1st Peter, Chapter 3, has this encouragement.

*“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.”*

Hope is – of course – on of the great trinity of Christian attributes or virtues of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 13. *“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;*

Gentleness is one of the foremost elements of the fruit of God’s Spirit to which Paul refers in his letter to the Galatians while reverence underpins everything the Bible says about relationship with God.

These three words --- Hope / Gentleness and Reverence have been very much to the fore in my thinking this week.

If you read through all 5 Chapters of 1 Peter, then you will see that it is very much concerned with Christian conduct --- how to live as a follower of Jesus Christ in the world. The setting of this letter is the early days of the Church when folk were working out doctrine – as we noted last week ---- but also practice – or praxis – as the theology teachers say – in other words the do’s and don’ts of living as a disciple of Jesus.

That practical setting – the fact that the writer of 1st Peter is concerned above all to give practical guidance and encouragement --- is important when we take one portion in isolation from the rest. The verses that stands out for me are – as I have said –at 1 Peter 3:15 and 16:

*“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.”*

In isolation – that portion might encourage us to believe that what is being asked of us is that we marshal an intellectual argument; that we sharpen our skills of logic and rhetoric – in order to persuade anyone who asks what is the basis of the hope that lies within us. But I want to suggest to you today that this is far less about intellectual argument than it is about our nature and our conduct. The writer is at pains to emphasise over and over that our conduct flows from the nature that is within us – and he emphasises important aspects of a true Christian nature when he highlights hope, gentleness and reverence.

During lockdown I have lost count of the number of times people have acknowledged how blessed we are to be on the coast, in beautiful East Lothian. The coincidence of spring and some outstanding weather has only made the richness of that blessing even more apparent. As the children have been noting --- when the glories of the natural world are so enveloping and obvious – our spirits are lifted. Stark contrast with the circumstances of those many poor souls whose surroundings are barren and dispiriting.

Just as we are affected by the physical environment around us --- so we are all affected by the prevailing atmosphere around us. The age-old advice to surround yourself with positive and encouraging people arises from learning by experience. One of the things that has surprised me during lockdown --- and I know that I am far from alone in this – is that I have found myself turning away from news bulletins and political analysis. Some might say that it is because I want to pretend that the current crisis does not exist; that it is a head in the sand kind of attitude. I think honesty demands that I admit that there is probably some truth in that. --- Yet I do not think that is by any means the whole story.

Within the news media there is huge pressure upon reporters to come up with a scoop ---- and the more sensational the better. It is a sad truth that sensational stories tend to be stories about negative things – exposing lies – hypocrisy – neglect – failure – incompetence ---- the list goes on. One consequence of that is that so many news reporters start from an assumption that there is always an element of these things to be found and that it is their bounden duty to expose it. Holding to account anyone in the public eye is interpreted relentlessly as digging for a flaw, a failure or a shortcoming. Interest in success is fleeting but exposing the negative and picking over the corpse is a prolonged feast. The trouble is – if you live and work in that kind of an atmosphere all the time – if you choose to immerse yourself in that kind of a world --- then it affects who you are. Surroundings – physical and psychological influence us. It’s a fact.

Last week I mentioned St Ignatius – who discovered that his wellbeing was influenced for the good by spiritual reflections and not by romantic adventures. I find most political reporters and investigative journalists seldom if ever do much for my sense of well-being – while others --- do. We do well to consider carefully the kind of people with whom we surround ourselves – the folk whom we allow to influence our own nature and attitudes. Which, of course, brings us to our Gospel reading for today.

In his farewell discourse to his disciples --- in other words --- of his final encouragement and guidance to his disciples --- Jesus promises that although he is no longer going to be by their sides as their leader, guide and primary influence – they will not left alone – for the Spirit will be with them. It was in this promise, when it was fulfilled, that the first disciples found the hope in which they carried the Good News and it was the fruit of the Spirit in their lives which was the true persuasion by which that Good News spread. It is no different today. Actions speak louder than words. Our conduct is what is likely to persuade of the authenticity of the hope and the faith with in us. Far more than any words.

We are in that time between Easter and Pentecost when we are called to wait upon God and to reflect on the necessity of having God’s Spirit within us if we are to bear fruit for God and to be persuasive in our faith. May God so bless you in this time.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

*Brian Hilsley*