

Easter 3, 2017

“Let your conduct among the Gentiles be honorable” (1 St. Peter 2.12)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Within the last hundred years, hundreds and hundreds of papyrus fragments from the early centuries of the Middle East have been discovered and analysed. These *libelli* as they are called, include the signed statements of individuals who made an oath during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Decius, (250 AD) that they were not worshippers of Jesus or the Christian God. One of these oaths reads like this:

“To the Sacrifice Officials: Aurelia Demos, wife of Aurelius Irenaeus, makes affidavit that it has always been my custom to offer sacrifice to the gods and I have now in your presence, according to your command, offered sacrifice and libation, and have partaken of the offering.”

Although this oath came from a period at least 150 years after today’s Epistle was written, it still gives some insight into the pressure the first Christians were facing. And, it helps us to understand the why St. Peter refers to them as “strangers and pilgrims”.

It may also be helpful to know that a letter, written in 110 AD to the Roman Emperor, by the governor of Bithynia, has been discovered. Bithynia was one of the provinces mentioned at the beginning of St. Peter’s Epistle where Christians were living as the minority under pressure. (He addressed his first letter to “the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” – page 232 in Pew Bible) This short letter reads as follows:

“With those who have been brought before me as Christians, I have pursued the following course: I have asked them if they were Christians, and if they confessed, I have asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment. If they have persisted, I have commanded them to be led away to punishment.”

Again, it gives insight into the pressure these ‘strangers and pilgrims’ were facing. They were lights in the darkness. They were swimming against a raging current -- a world system unsympathetic to the Way of Jesus Christ and the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet, what did St. Peter tell these Christians? “Let your conduct among the Gentiles be honourable; that whereas they speak against

you as evil doers, they may, by your good works which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation". "Good works", here has also been translated as "beautiful works" – "that by your beautiful works which they shall behold as eye-witnesses".

"Let your conduct among the Gentiles be honorable." Let your speech and your behaviour be above reproach as you work and live amongst those who oppose you. Let your light shine before your neighbours so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father Who is in Heaven...on the day of visitation. "The day of visitation" refers to the Lord's visit. It could mean not only the great last day – when Christ returns -- but as one commentator says: "whatever occasion God brings matters to a crisis. The visitation is a visitation of the Christians and the heathen alike, and it brings both grace and vengeance, according as men choose to receive it".

The focus of St. Peter is on living the new life – the new life of Christ the Risen Lord. The life of Him Who conquered all the powers of sin and death and hell. This new life has been given to you by God. It is a benefit which we do not deserve; nevertheless, in His infinite mercy, the Lord offers it to us. Our Heavenly Father offers to come and dwell in us by His Spirit and actually give us a new perspective and a new strength. He wants to wash you and me, and cleanse us and clothe us in the righteousness of His Son. He wants to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness. So this new life means that the Lord will actually unite/join us to Himself. Our life will be His life, by the Spirit's indwelling. And by that holy union we will receive spiritual power and gifts to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil.

"This is the will of God," wrote St. Peter "that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men". This fits with what Jesus says in In this morning's Gospel: "A woman when she is in travail, has sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that a child is born into the world. And you now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you".

At the moment, we are in a certain travail – a painfully, difficult time – a time of great labour because of the unwillingness of our culture to acknowledge our dependence upon God. St. Peter refers to "the ignorance of foolish men"; and this

applies to any culture that denies the holiness and truth of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not only does it apply generally to a culture, but to an individual or group; it even applies to the Church – to our branch of the Church – whenever she denies the truth of God’s holy Word.

And what are we to do in the midst of this travail? St. Peter’s advice to the early Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia is also good for us: “As strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts...Let your conduct be honourable...With well-doing silence the ignorance of foolish men. ...And, submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.” In other words, without denying the Lord Jesus Christ, obey the laws of the land.

In all of this we know we are called to bear witness to a better way; a Heavenly Way; to the One Who has died and rose again. We are to bear witness to Him Who stands among us and lives within us; to Christ Jesus the Lord Who will come again with power and great glory; Who even now gives us the victorious Hope and new life of His Resurrection from the dead. Alleluia! Amen.