

**A SERMON PREACHED BY THE DEAN AT MATTINS ON THE 9TH SUNDAY
AFTER TRINITY (1 AUGUST 2010)**

The two short letters attributed to St Peter in the New Testament contain very practical, down-to-earth advice for the new Gentile Christians to whom the author was writing. It was quite common to attach the name of a notable person to such a letter, but I don't think many scholars believe St Peter was really the author – but that is neither here nor there.

What is particularly interesting in the first chapter of the second letter, which we heard read, is that list of virtues to which his readers ought to aspire.

Such lists were not uncommon in the days before people had access to books, or perhaps were able to read at all: lists were a way of delivering instruction and were readily committed to memory. Paul, in Galatians, for example, gives us the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. In 1 Timothy, the man of God is instructed to follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness... and there are other examples in the New Testament and early Christian writings.

So why should the example in 2 Peter be of particular interest? Well, because of the circumstances of those who would receive the letter, those who would try to commit the words to memory; for it is almost certain that the Church was facing, or was in imminent danger of, persecution – the knock on the door in the night, arrest, trial for following this new way, the Christian way. The First Letter of Peter was in a real sense a call to Christian priorities, not least to bind the community together, and the Second Letter follows on, affirming the importance of knowledge of Jesus, and offering what we might think of as equipment for the way, the journey of faith.

So what is in the list in Chapter 1? First of all, you must support your faith with goodness, or at least make every effort to, and then the writer builds on each virtue, rather like the rungs of a ladder, or the laying of bricks to build a wall.

Support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness and godliness with mutual affection and mutual affection with love...

Why? Because 'If these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... therefore, be all the more eager.'

Such attributes would stand the person of faith in good stead at any time, but in the cruel circumstances of the moment, they are surely quite remarkable. Love is the crown of all the virtues, overlaying (or if you prefer underpinning) all the rest, which is why we heard that almost steamy eulogy from the Song of Solomon in our First Lesson.

Teilhard de Charden, in very different circumstances from the writer of 2 Peter, but elevating the practice of love in just the same way, put it like this. His words, alongside those from our

Epistle, are full of meaning and value for our oh-so-apatetic age, just as they would be if we were awaiting the knock on the door, in fear of our very lives:

*The day will come when
after harnessing space,
the winds,
the tides,
and gravitation,
we shall harness for God the energies of love
and on that day, for the second time in the history of the world,
we shall have discovered fire.*
