

This is an exceptional time. The events we have suffered in France challenge us on a number of levels: as human beings, as citizens here, and as Christians. They raise questions to which there are not always easy answers, and offer a brutal and striking reminder of what I was saying only last Sunday: we may have the impression that little changes in day-to-day life, but in fact it doesn't take a lot to upset it completely.

To address this, I have chosen this Bible passage, which gives some guidelines for living and moving forward, at every level of our existence: as humans, as citizens, and as Christians.

Firstly, Peter reminds his readers that they are simply passing through this world: they are "strangers and pilgrims" here. At the end of the day, our hope lies elsewhere. As the writer to the Hebrews says, "created things, which may be shaken, will disappear... we, however, are receiving a kingdom that can never be shaken" (Hebrews 12:29-30). The attacks our country has just experienced have shaken us and shocked us. They demonstrate only too well that what seems to be permanent and settled can be shaken. This realisation is far from pleasant, but that is indeed how things are. But faced with this, we have the firm hope of being heirs to an unshakeable kingdom.

That said, being "strangers and pilgrims" does not excuse us from being involved in the world in which we live. Writing to the Christians in Corinth who were tempted to withdraw from the world around them, Paul emphasise that to achieve that, they would actually have to leave it altogether (1 Cor 5:10). In his prayer to his heavenly Father, Jesus does not ask him to take his disciples out of the world, but to protect them from evil, even as he sends them into the world (John 17:15,18). Similarly, far from encouraging his readers to withdraw from the world, evil as it may be, Peter tells them to "live out their lives among those who do not know God". He does so with a specific aim in mind: enabling these people who do not yet know God to glorify him when the right time comes. As a result, he exhorts us to exhibit good behaviour and engage in good works (v12).

We may be sure that our inheritance lies elsewhere, but we cannot simply opt out of this world on the grounds that we are strangers here. Rather, we have a responsibility to be very much present in this world, witnessing to this hope of an unshakeable kingdom by our actions, our behaviour, and our words.

This is all the more relevant at times like this when our world is being shaken up so much. This passage offers a number of ways we can achieve this.

First of all, verse 17 says "respect everyone" (or in older versions, "honour all men"). Of course we will love our "brothers and sisters in Christ" in particular (v17b), but we are to respect "everyone". This is not only a core principle of the French Republic - what we refer to today as "diversity", it is also an essential aspect of Christian life. And of course Peter was writing well before Voltaire. As Christians, we believe in "agape" love, the love that gives of itself for others. That involves accepting women and men that are not like us, that don't look like us, or believe the same things as us, honouring them simply because like you or me, they are God's creation. Our leaders are currently calling on us to rise above political or communitarian divisions to defend this principle of the Republic: I believe that with the love of Christ in our hearts, we should be capable of doing at least as much if not more.

One of the goals of the attacks we have just lived through is to undermine respect for others. We have all experienced the impact of that: all of a sudden, when you pass a woman wearing a veil, or a guy with a bit of a beard, suspicion can quickly emerge. We can be tempted to yield to "evil desires that fight against you" (v11), "fleshly desires" such as fear, prejudice or even hatred.

We are called to respect everyone. As Paul writes to the Romans, "do not be conquered by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21). "Living out good lives among the pagans" means rising to this challenge - and that involves deliberate action on our part.

Our passage also includes another word that has been mentioned a lot lately: freedom. "Act as those who are free", says Peter, "but do not let your freedom become a cloak to hide evil actions" (v16). Paul says something similar to the Galatians: "you were called to freedom; this freedom should not be an excuse for your evil desires" (Gal 5:13).

For Christians, freedom refers above all to freedom from sin, condemnation and judgement under the law of God - achieved for us by the grace of God, made effective for us in Christ. But more broadly speaking, it appears that God likes freedom: "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). God is love, and love cannot be forced. I'm not going to solve all the philosophical questions about freedom and evil here this morning, but it is clear from Genesis that God is so committed to freedom of conscience that he left it possible for man to choose between good and evil in order to preserve this freedom. And whatever

you think about predestination, in human terms we can never force anybody to accept the Good News of the Gospel; that would be a contradiction in terms.

In this country we are glad to enjoy freedom of worship, freedom of conscience and thus freedom of expression. We may not agree about the Charlie Hebdo cartoons and we may not feel able to identify with the slogan "I too am Charlie" (Je suis Charlie). We may feel that like some others, they use this freedom from which we benefit as "a cloak to cover evil" (v16). Nevertheless, I believe that defending this national principle of freedom is fully in line with the Christian message, even if freedom necessarily entails the possibility of it being abused.

We are to render to Caesar that which is Caesars and to God that which is God's but this passage also shows us that we can honour both God and the king, in other words our leaders (v17). The two are not necessarily incompatible. Indeed, even as Peter says his Christian readers are strangers and pilgrims, he also encourages them to obey the authorities (v13). Of course, if the government were to adopt a policy that was completely opposed to the Gospel - rather like Nebuchadnezzar decreeing that everyone should bow down to a statue of himself, or Darius prohibiting anyone praying to anyone other than him (Dan 3:1-23; 6) - then disobedience like that of Daniel and his companions would be in order. In such cases, as Peter says a little further on, we would be "suffering patiently" for having "done good", which he describes as "pleasing to God" (v21). And we should not forget that Christians are in fact being persecuted by the authorities in many countries today.

However, this is not the case in France. Peter tells us the king is there "to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good" (v14). Despite all their failings and all the grounds for criticism, I think we can agree that this is precisely what our leaders are attempting to do at present and that in view of that, we should honour them and obey them... even to the point, as Romans 13 (another similar passage to this one) reminds us, of paying our taxes (Rom 13:6-7)!

Lastly, this passage encourages us to live at all times as servants of God (v16). That means that in difficult times, faced with uncertainty and questions, we should seek to be attentive to what God wants us to do, at any and all levels: in our personal walk with him; as citizens (even if we are strangers and pilgrims too); and as his creatures. It's important to think things through, but this passage also talks about our behaviour and actions. Our service before God needs to be lived out in the flesh, in a whole variety of ways, first and foremost by loving our neighbour.