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October 4th: 1 Kings 18 & 1 Peter 2:11–3:7

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Alastair Roberts

The showdown on Mount Carmel. Righteous conduct among the Gentiles.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Kings 18—After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth. So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria, and Ahab called Obadiah who was over the household.

Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and fed them with bread and water. And Ahab said to Obadiah, Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys, perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals. So they divided the land between them to pass through it.

Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself. And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him

and fell on his face and said, Is it you, my Lord Elijah? And he answered him, It is I. Go tell your Lord, behold, Elijah is here.

And he said, How have I sinned that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab to kill me? As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my Lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, He is not here, he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation that they had not found you. And now you say, Go tell your Lord, behold, Elijah is here.

And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the Lord will carry you I know not where. And so when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the Lord from my youth. Has it not been told my Lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, how I hid a hundred men of the Lord's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water? And now you say, Go tell your Lord, behold, Elijah is here.

And he will kill me. And Elijah said, As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today. So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him.

And Ahab went to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, Is it you, you troubler of Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel, but you have. And your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.

Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table. So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him.

But if Baal, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord.

But Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let two bulls be given to us and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it.

And you call upon the name of your God and I will call upon the name of the Lord. And the God who answers by fire, he is God. And all the people answered, It is well spoken.

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your God and put no fire to it. And they took the bull that was given them and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, O Baal, answer us. But there was no voice and no one answered.

And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.

And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation. But there was no voice and no one answered, and no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, Come near to me. And all the people came near to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be your name.

And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seers of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood.

And he said, Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood. And he said, Do it a second time. And they did it a second time.

And he said, Do it a third time. And they did it a third time. And the water ran round the altar and filled the trench also with water.

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, The Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God. And Elijah said to them, Seize the prophets of Baal, let not one of them escape. And they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the brook Chisholm and slaughtered them there.

And Elijah said to Ahab, Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain. So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel.

And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up and looked and said, There is nothing.

And he said, Go again, seven times. And at the seventh time he said, Behold, a little

cloud like a man's hand rising from the sea. And he said, Go up, say to Ahab, Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.

And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

Chapter 17 of 1 Kings began with the word of Elijah the prophet, declaring that there would be a drought until his word ended it. In chapter 18 it begins with the word of the Lord declaring the end of the drought. The Lord himself calls time upon the judgment that Elijah has zealously initiated against Israel.

In the previous chapter he was like Noah in the ark, cocooned and protected, the ravens bringing him food, and then later on the widow of Zarephath feeding him with her jug of oil and her jar of flour. So Elijah goes to present himself to Ahab. However, Elijah, as one who has been given power to perform miracles by God, doesn't just want to give up in his zeal, he wants a showdown.

And so, with no evidence that he has given word to do so by the Lord, he initiates a showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. Once again, this is not an example of going against the word of the Lord, rather it's taking the initiative with an authority that has been granted to him by the Lord as a miracle worker and prophet. The famine at this point was wiping out human and animal life in the land, and Ahab and his servant Obadiah had to go throughout the land dividing the land between them to find some grass for their horses to survive.

We saw allusions to Noah in the preceding chapter, and there are allusions that continue into this chapter. While Elijah is all on his lonesome in his cocoon that's protected by the Lord, being served by the animals, Obadiah is out there in the judgement of the drought itself, trying to protect the servants of the Lord, the prophets, and also the horses. This contrast isn't exactly a favourable one for Elijah.

Elijah, whose name means My God is the Lord, is greatly driven by zeal for the Lord. He is like the son who wants to avenge his father that has been bad-mouthed by one of his schoolmates. While there might be a praiseworthy commitment to his father, and a concern for his father's name, such zeal can easily be driven by a person's own pride.

Elijah has notions that he is all alone and wants to call down the heavens from above to judge the earth, and yet it's clear by the case of Obadiah, whose name means Servant of the Lord, that that is not in fact the case. There are other prophets of the Lord that are being preserved by him, and many of the Lord's creatures are also being threatened by the drought that Elijah has brought upon the land. Elijah is a heroic prophet, but as we will see in the next chapter, his zeal needs to be broken down to size.

The Lord has to challenge him in his particular way. Ahab and Obadiah searching throughout the land for grass might remind us of the raven and the dove that are circling round trying to find somewhere to land after the flood. While the birds were looking for dry ground, here Ahab and Obadiah are searching for grass, something that can give life to the animals, and their concern for the animals here should also make us think of the story of Noah.

Obadiah, as a courageous person, has hidden 100 prophets, 50 to a cave, and he's fed them with bread and water. This should, as Rabbi David Foreman observes, remind us of the ravens of the preceding chapter, just as the ravens were ministers of God to the need of Elijah, so Obadiah is a minister of God to the needs of these 100 prophets. Elijah makes himself discoverable, and Obadiah is clearly afraid of him.

He believes it's quite likely that Elijah will just go his way and leave him to suffer the consequences. He's a faithful servant of the Lord, a servant in one of the most difficult situations of all, in the house of Ahab himself. However, this maverick miracle worker and prophet Elijah does not necessarily seem to care for anyone beyond himself.

He's gone the last few years bringing great judgement upon the land, existing in his own cocoon, and while Obadiah has been struggling to protect the prophets and to feed the horses and to do all these other things, Elijah has been nowhere to be seen. He is not sure that he can trust Elijah at this point, but Elijah assures him, and Ahab goes and meets Elijah, and as he meets him he greets him as, you troubler of Israel. Elijah throws the accusation back, it is Ahab in fact who is the troubler of Israel, through his idolatry.

It was not in fact Elijah that brought the drought upon the land so much as Ahab by his idolatry bringing the curse of the covenant upon the people. We might also, as Rabbi David Foreman notes, see in these words, troubler of Israel, a reference back to a previous event, it's the story of Achan. Achan is the one other character in scripture who's referred to in this particular way, as a troubler of Israel, and he's referred to in that way after he has taken some of the devoted things from the destruction of Jericho.

Why might that be significant? What happens immediately before Elijah comes on the scene? Hiel rebuilds the city of Jericho. As part of the re-canonisation of Israel, this is the climactic sign. They're rebuilding that place that was supposed to be a memorial to God's destruction of the pagans that pre-existed them in the land.

This is an Achan-like sin, if Achan took of the devoted things in the city of Jericho. In rebuilding Jericho, Hiel and Ahab are also taking of devoted things. If the story of Noah and the ark ended up on Mount Herarat, the story of Elijah and the drought ends up on Mount Carmel.

Elijah arranges this, seemingly on his own initiative, as a grand showdown with the prophets of Baal. He gathers together the prophets of Baal and Asherah and he sets up a

test designed to prove, once and for all, that the Lord is the true God. As with the drought, this is a challenge to the great God Baal.

Baal is supposed to be the God of the storm, the God who brings thunder and lightning, the God who brings rain. He can't bring rain. The land has been in drought for many years and now he will be tested again.

Can he answer by fire? The prophets of Baal end up making a fool of themselves and Elijah treats them as objects of ridicule. He speaks of Baal, their great deity. Either he is musing or he is relieving himself or he is on a journey or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.

They challenge the honour of the Lord and he is going to challenge the honour of their God. As they are whipped up into an ever greater frenzy to try and get Baal to respond, they make a humiliating spectacle of themselves. Like Noah built an altar for burnt offerings on Mount Ararat, Elijah re-establishes the altar of the Lord on Mount Carmel for his sacrifice of the burnt offering.

And he makes things hard for himself. He pours out twelve jars full of water upon the burnt offering and the water fills the trench around the altar of twelve stones too. Then Elijah calls upon the Lord and the Lord answers his prayer and fire comes down from the Lord and consumes the burnt offering, the wood and the stones and the dust and licks up the water in the trench too.

Perhaps you might see this as a climactic symbol of the whole drought. You have the twelve stones representing Israel and you have the twelve jars of water, the rains that pour upon the nation over the course of the year and the trench is the rivers that irrigate it. The bull represents the whole congregation and the fire of the Lord comes down and consumes everything.

What was once well watered has become as dry as a bone. Elijah wants to end the drought with a bang and the response of the people is encouraging. They respond with a declaration of the Lord's sovereignty, the Lord he is God, the Lord he is God and then they kill the prophets of Baal.

It seems as if the victory of Elijah has been achieved, that in his zeal he has effected the reformation of the nation. Yet he will soon find himself most disappointed as no such reformation is forthcoming. Elijah then instructs Ahab to leave because the rain is about to come and when Ahab leaves to eat and drink, Elijah goes to the top of Mount Carmel with his servant and he prays.

Once again we have things that might remind us of the story of Noah and the raven and the dove. Like Noah sent up the birds, Elijah sends up his servant to look for rain, to scan the horizon to see if any cloud is to be seen. Much as the sending of the birds occurred

over periods of seven days, Elijah's servant is sent seven times until finally he returns with the news that he has seen a cloud like a man's hand.

Ahab is instructed to prepare his chariot and to make haste. The heavens grow black and there is a tremendous rainstorm. Ahab rides his chariot to Jezreel but by the power of the Lord, Elijah runs ahead of him.

Perhaps we are supposed to see something of the pursuit of the Israelites by the chariots of Pharaoh in this particular event. A question to consider, Elijah is a zealous prophet of the Lord who wants a great public showdown with the enemies of the Lord that will prove once and for all that the Lord is God. Obadiah by contrast is a faithful servant of the Lord who is a deep operative within the court of Ahab.

His work is not served by great showdowns but requires secrecy and care. What might the relationship between the characters of Obadiah and Elijah have to teach us today about different forms of service in a hostile society? First Peter chapter 2 verse 11 to chapter 3 verse 7 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the Emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honour everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the Emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

For what credit is it, if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled he did not revile in return, when he suffered he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of

your souls. Likewise wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external, the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewellery, or the clothing you wear, but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord. And you are her children, if you do good, and do not fear anything that is frightening. Likewise husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

From the second half of 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter presents his hearers, seemingly new or young converts, with a pattern of behaviour that should mark them out from those around them. He begins with a more general statement. They are supposed to understand themselves as the sort of persons that they are, sojourners and exiles.

As sojourners they are people who are dwelling temporarily, and as exiles they are not citizens of the place where they are dwelling, people belonging to that land. Rather they belong to another place, their citizenship lies elsewhere. Such an understanding is paradigmatic for the people of God.

You see the same thing in Philippians chapter 3 verse 20, But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Or in Hebrews chapter 11 verses 9 to 10, By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

In the very early Christian letter, the Epistle to Diognetus, you also see something of this understanding in a passage that is very heavily informed by 1 Peter chapter 2. For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind, either in locality, or in speech, or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life. Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma, as some are.

But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and Barbarians, as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners. They bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers.

Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men, and they beget children, but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives.

They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives.

They love all men, and they are persecuted by all. They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endued with life.

They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they are bound in all things. They are dishonoured, and yet they are glorified in their dishonour.

They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless. They are insulted, and they respect.

Doing good, they are punished as evildoers. Being punished, they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life. War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews, and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those that hate them cannot tell the reason of their hostility.

They are charged to abstain from passions of the flesh, because these things wage war against the soul. They are living in hostile territory, and the flesh that is being referred to here is more like Adamic humanity in its fallen and weak condition. Our souls by contrast are our own selves which are compromised and threatened and challenged by the passions of the flesh.

We are in constant warfare, and Christians will face constant accusations, false accusations. Christians should live lives of exemplary godliness, lives beyond slander. The hope is that such conduct will lead Gentiles to glorify God on the day of visitation.

Gentiles is an interesting word to use here. It is applied to those outside of the church. The church is contrasted with the nations in the way that Israel formerly was.

Israel set against the Gentiles is now the church set against the Gentiles. In the verses that follow, Peter will particularise this message to people in particular relationships and callings. The beginning of verse 13, be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, could be read as a heading for what follows.

As in Ephesians chapter 5 verse 21, being subject or submitting ourselves to others is fundamental to Christian behaviour in the world in every single context. Peter's approach is very similar to Paul's. We must place others before ourselves and behave with meekness towards all.

Ultimately this is for the Lord's sake and in obedience to him. This is applied first of all to the Emperor, which is presumably Nero at this time, and to governors and other rulers. These have been given the task of punishing evil and praising those who do good.

This is similar to what Paul says in Romans chapter 13 verses 1-4. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Rulers in both Paul's teaching and in Peter's are spoken of as servants of Christ and they must be treated in such a manner. They may be unfaithful servants of Christ, but they are servants nonetheless. This both underwrites their authority and also demystifies their authority.

The ruler or the king or the emperor is not ultimately over all. He is not divine. He is a servant of God.

That's all he is. He is not someone who can place himself over God. The ruler has been given the task of punishing those who do evil and praising those who do good.

This is fundamentally a task of judgment, a task of establishing a moral order within the land. Christians must live, meekly, as exemplary citizens, silencing any slanderers. As people in a democratic society our relationship with government is of course different in some respects from that which would have existed in Peter's day, but the fundamental note of subjection must be retained.

In part this approach to subjection is informed by the fact that we are citizens of another country. The lands that we currently inhabit are not our final home and as a result we should not be overly preoccupied with our political rights or the honour of our nations, but should be far more concerned with the place where our citizenship is from and where our treasure is, in heaven with Christ. Part of what Christian freedom entails is the fact that the governors and rulers and other people over us in this age are not the final horizon.

We can look beyond them to God to whom our submission ultimately is given. Freedom then must be rightly understood. It must not be a cover up for evil or rebellion.

We have a general duty of honour to others. Christian faith is a faith that accords dignity to all. The radical nature of this, in societies where people are often denied all dignity or

others are granted dignity at the expense of their neighbours, should really not be missed.

While we can often focus upon the unequal distribution of wealth, the deeper inequity can often be the distribution of dignity. Many people in our societies feel despised by their neighbours. Many feel ignored, unseen or denigrated.

Much life is lived as a vaunting of ourselves over others, an attempt to gain the upper hand, to gain dignity at other people's expense. The two words, honour everyone, could not be more radical in such a context. In addition to this more general duty of honour, there is a particular duty of love to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This love is one that must engage both the actions and the affections. It should also be the distinguishing mark of the people of God. See how they love one another.

The supreme duty of fear of God comes above everything and before everything else. And this is the third charge that he gives in this verse. The emperor is the final one.

He must be honoured. The way that we speak of him, the way that we live under his rule, all of these things must be characterised by respect of the office and of the one who is within it. Yet the honouring of the emperor is not the same thing as the fear of God.

But the fear of God comes first. The emperor is not God and cannot take his place. Peter does not address masters but speaks to servants and particularly servants in households.

The servant must submit to his master. Peter doesn't deal with the injustice of the institution of slavery but rather speaks of the way that someone in the position of a servant must act. The institution isn't simply invalidated.

However, it is noteworthy that Peter chiefly deals with it within a frame of injustice. He focuses not upon masters in general but upon cruel and unjust masters in particular. The submission of the servant is not contingent upon the goodness of their masters.

This is biblical teaching more generally. When we think about submission many people want to have escape clauses whether it's to government or wives to husbands or servants to masters. Many people are most concerned that there should be exception clauses and these will be foregrounded over the duty of submission that really should take first place.

It is important to recognise that such statements are not justification of the institution of slavery more generally nor are they supposed to be turned around as if they granted the master a divine claim over the servant. The servant's subjection is on account of Christ not on account of his master. The servant is called to identify with the way of Christ himself who suffered injustice righteously and not on account of any sin on his part.

There is no honour in suffering for sinful behaviour. Indeed suffering for righteousness sake is suffering to which all Christians have been called. It is a matter of walking in the footsteps of Christ and being joined with him in his suffering.

He has given us the example and we must follow after him. Peter speaks of the sufferings of Christ in a way that presents them as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, weaving allusions to Isaiah chapter 53 in with descriptions of Christ's behaviour in his trials and on the cross. Verses 3-5 and 7 of Isaiah chapter 53 read, He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Peter concludes the chapter by returning to verse 6 of Isaiah chapter 53, All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned, every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. And he connects this to the redemption that they have received. You have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

Moving into chapter 3, he calls wives to be subject to their own husbands. Likewise, not just like the slave should be subject to his master, but also like men have to be subject to rulers and governments. Submission isn't something exclusive to wives, rather it is the general pattern of Christian behaviour that must be refracted into the particularities of their specific vocation.

There is reason for concern when this is forgotten. When the submission of wives becomes something just by itself, rather than the manner of Christian behaviour in which we all put others before ourselves and we submit to those over us, the biblical teaching can be twisted into one of male dominance, rather than one of the way of Christ who took on the form of the servant. Once again, the subjection here is ultimately for the Lord's sake.

The woman's true master is Christ, not her husband, just as we must submit to the ruling authorities, less as the great lords over us, but more as the servants of Christ, so the wife must submit to her husband as a fellow servant of Christ with a particular calling relative to her. As the true master is Christ, not the husband, the husband is not given a right of mastery over his wife. The more general command of meek faithfulness and exemplary behaviour is now applied to the wife.

Early churches were predominantly female in their membership, and slaves were very

highly represented too. Many women would have had pagan husbands, and this would be a situation that the early church would often have to address. We should also be clear that marriage for many would have been very cruel.

The point of Peter's teaching here is not that mistreated slaves and abused wives should have no recourse, rather he is presenting them with a pattern for Christian conduct in a society where there often was no such recourse. Their conduct must be respectful and pure, it must be driven by the fear of God. And the danger for women would be to overvalue outward adornment, broadcasting wealth and status and physical appearance.

The true adornment, however, is that of Christian graces, graces that are unassuming, meek and modest. This is not going to win human attention so much, but God sees it. It is not a pursuit of human praise and honour and advancement over others.

Dress, adornment and cosmetics can so often be driven by a preoccupation with advancement or preference over others, and must, like everything else, be subject to the Christian disciplines of modesty, meekness and concern for others over ourselves. Paul makes similar points in 1 Timothy 2 verses 9-10. Women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness, with good works.

Neither of these passages are condemning attractive dress or appearance, but they do challenge attitudes that typically drive people's pursuit of these things, something that Peter, like Paul, presents as a temptation for women especially. For those women who might be worried that they will not be seen if they follow Peter's instruction, Peter wants them to be aware of their immense value in the sight of God. God sees and truly values what others might not have the eyes to see or to value.

This is the pattern of behaviour of the holy women of old, the great heroines of the faith. They didn't trumpet their presence, but God saw the remarkable character of their quiet and unassuming graces, and he wants his people to do the same. These heroines of the faith, their submission to their husbands, is especially singled out as the context where their graces are most seen and where they flourished.

Their submission to their husbands was driven by hope in God. It takes a lot not to seek to push oneself forward or to assume charge. But the people of God, men and women, are those who are prepared to live in situations of dependence, of lack of power and control, and to put the interests of others before themselves.

This is what it meant for Abraham to dwell as a stranger in the Promised Land, for Moses to lead the Israelites out into the wilderness, or for David not to strike out at Saul. Such a way of living demands a fierce and determined dependence upon and hope in God. Sarah, the mother of the faithful, is the great example here.

Sarah spoke of Abraham with great respect and honoured him, and she courageously entered situations that were dangerous on his account, following his lead as God had called him. Sarah wasn't a weak and spinelessly compliant woman. It took immense courage for her to follow Abraham and his calling, especially as she generally didn't enjoy the same agency within it as he did.

She is defined by a determination to do good and by fearlessness, and her daughters must be also. Their situations might be complicated by unfaithful husbands. They might need to be submissive to pagan husbands, even while courageously resisting their intimidation and their attempts to prevent them from following Christ.

Submission, as Peter presents it, is not a fearful capitulation to intimidation or passive compliance with lordship. Quite the opposite, it is courageous and active. In verse 7 he moves on to husbands.

Once again we see the word likewise, introducing the command to husbands. In verses 13 and 17 we see a connection between being subject and honouring. These things look different from relationship to relationship.

Husbands and wives are not in a symmetrical relationship at all, but the duty of honouring others and placing them before ourselves is refracted within each of these contexts and relationships. Husbands are called to live with their wives in an understanding way. They are called to live with them, to share the realities of life together.

They are called to live with understanding. This might be read as a reference to the knowledge of Christ and his truth, but I think it is more likely a reference to sympathetic understanding and attention to their wives. They are to be loving and considerate.

This requires developing the arts of listening and noticing, of observing those things that will enable their wives to flourish. And they must show honour to the woman as the weaker vessel. Women are weaker than men in various ways, most immediately in physical strength, but also in certain other respects such as power in wider society and vulnerability to various forms of mistreatment.

The husband's response to this ought not to be a cruel dominance over her, but a greater regard for and honouring of her. That the response to relative weakness should be greater honour was exceedingly counter-cultural in Peter's day and remains so in many ways in our own. The husband must show respect for his wife and ensure that others do too.

He must protect her from harm and put her interests ahead of his own in the exercise of his strength. The wife is a joint heir with her husband of the grace of eternal life. They are both equal in dignity.

They are servants of Christ together and they must treat each other accordingly. Husbands must show great concern for the health of their marriages and their relationship with their wives. If they do not, their spiritual life might be greatly harmed.

Our relationship with God is not hermetically sealed from our relationship with our neighbour and our closest neighbour is our spouse. If we are not at peace and in right relationship with our neighbour, and most particularly with our spouse, we may find that our prayers are not being answered. A question to consider.

What are some broader ethical patterns that can be seen in Peter's teaching concerning Christian conduct in wider society and in the context of the household?