

THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

(Acts 21.27-36)

Introduction

Last Summer, Kathie and I spent a few days in Oxford and I was determined to walk up to Broad Street by Balliol College, just north of the former city wall. There is something I had wanted to see there for a very long time.

In the centre of the road, there is a cross of brick and granite set into the tarmac, marking the exact location where Hugh Latimer, Nicolas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer were burnt at the stake in 1555 and 1556 for their faith in Christ.

It is said, that Latimer called out, as they lit the fire, "Be of good comfort, and play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." In fact, Ridley burned extremely slowly and he suffered excruciating agonies.

So, we arrive at the third characteristic of the church in the Acts of the Apostles. We've looked at the new church and the growing church. Next week it's the global church. Today I am going to speak about the persecuted church.

Paul's Riots

Today's reading situates the Apostle Paul in the temple in Jerusalem. The Acts of the Apostles records Paul visiting 14 different towns. He gets serious grief in ten of them; brawls, riots, stoning, arrests, imprisonment, expulsions, punch ups, attempted murder, the whole works.

The former Bishop of Durham Tom Wright once said, "Wherever Saint Paul went, there was a riot. Wherever I go, they serve tea." I know how he feels!

In our passage, Paul is publicly accused of taking a Gentile into the area of the temple strictly reserved for Jews only. The allegation is based on a false

assumption. Nobody saw it exactly. People just presumed it happened because the two were seen elsewhere in the city earlier on.

In other words, someone with a loud voice puts two and two together and comes up with 89. And it all kicks off until Paul is beaten to within an inch of his life.

Notice, nobody defends him, nobody stands up for him, until the Romans turn up, not because they care about Paul particularly, but purely because they are anxious to prevent any civil disorder that might escalate out of control. Yet again, Paul escapes by a hair's breadth being torn apart by a lynch mob.

Global Persecution

Last year, the International aid organization Open Doors brought to public attention the story of a 14-year-old Ugandan girl they called Susan who refused to renounce Christ, even when locked away in a room and left to starve nearly to death.

Her school had hosted a visiting speaker who told the story of Jesus Christ. As she heard about the God who came to earth to save us from our sins, her heart burst into flame and she gave her life to Christ.

Her Muslim father was not pleased and tried to get her to stop following Jesus and going to church. He even threatened to kill both her and her brother if she didn't stop worshiping Christ. But Susan refused.

Then one day her father took her into a room in the house and put a mat on the floor. He told her to sit on it and not move from it until she was willing to deny Jesus. He didn't return to that room for three months.

During that time, Susan's brother would sneak her water and an occasional fried banana. After three months, neighbours began to wonder where she was and Susan's brother finally told them what was going on.

The neighbours called the police who came to the house and found her sitting in her own filth on the mat. She was barely alive. Weighing only 44 pounds, the bones in her legs had begun to grow into the position in which she was sitting. She was rushed to the hospital where she began extensive treatment.

When asked why she didn't try to escape or even leave the mat, she said, "Because my father said if I left the mat, I would be denying Jesus."

This year, you may remember, the then Foreign Secretary commissioned an evidence-based report on Christian persecution. The headline of the report was that 80% of religiously motivated violence is against believers in Jesus. Here are some other highlights:

- For the 17th consecutive year, North Korea is the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. But, tragically, other countries are catching up.
- Eight of the top ten most dangerous places to be a Christian are Islamic, the other two are Marxist.
- More than 200 million believers in the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian experience what are defined as high levels of persecution because of their faith.
- Over 3,000 Christians were known to have been killed for their faith in 2018, more than twice as many as in the previous year, but this is believed to be the tip of the iceberg.

In June this year the Christian NGO Barnabas Fellowship published a report about a group of 500 Nigerian Christian converts from Islam and their children. It abnormal for this tribe to gather in such large numbers, but all of them had already been attacked by Islamist militants and they hoped that a larger group would give them a measure of security.

But Boko Haram attacked the group and captured 76, taking them back to their camp. At the camp, the Christians were tortured, and their four male leaders were told they must deny Christ or they would be shot. The four refused and were duly shot dead, in full view of the rest of the group.

A week later, the four widows of the dead men were told they must renounce their Christian faith or their children would be shot. They were given time to

think over this dreadful choice. As they agonized together that evening, their children came running in, telling their mothers that Jesus had appeared to them and told them all would be well.

Jesus then appeared to the whole group of 72, and told them not to fear for He would protect them. He said they should stay strong, and that He was the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The next day, the four mothers gave their decision to the terrorists – they would not deny Christ. The militants prepared to shoot the children, who were already lined up against a wall. The youngest was a little girl of four. Suddenly the militants began screaming and clawing at their own heads. Shouting “Snakes!” they fled the scene, and some of them dropped dead.

One of the Christian men reached for the gun of a dead terrorist but the four-year-old put her hand on his arm to stop him. “You don’t need to do that,” she said, “Can’t you see the men in white fighting for us? It seems they were delivered by angels.

Persecution at Home

It is extremely unlikely that any of us will face that kind of persecution. It is usually more subtle in the West.

Three or four years ago, an evangelical Christian MP, Tim Farron, rose to become leader of one of our political parties. During the general election campaign, he was constantly ambushed, bullied and trapped by a line of questioning about Christianity and sexual ethics.

Certain personalities in the media decided that this issue must define him, whatever his voting record on the matter might be. Tim seemed determined to not play the victim, but his resignation as party leader was inevitable in the end.

Just this week, someone told me that his daughter, who is a pupil at Ian Ramsey, a Church of England school, had a Bible in her bag. A boy ran up behind her, saw the Bible, took it out of her bag and threw it up in the air as far as he could

down the corridor. If that had been a hijab or a Sikh turban there would have been outrage, but it was a Bible and nothing was done.

Down the years, persecuted Christians have not sought vengeance on their oppressors. Like Jesus, the record books show that they pray more for perseverance, to stay and stand under the strain, than for deliverance.

Testimonies of severe persecution often tell of the sweet experience of the presence of God. Sometimes those being crushed for Christ's sake overflow with joy. Jesus feels near, heaven feels real. And the suffering seems so light and trivial compared with that.

Ending

As I end, I want to mention Richard Wurmbrand was a pastor in Romania at the time of the Communist regime of Ceausescu. He was imprisoned for 14 years and suffered greatly.

Some years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe, Wurmbrand was asked in the USA, if it really is possible to rejoice in your sufferings.

This is what he said in reply. "I hope my answer doesn't offend anybody but I tell you this: when I was in prison, they put all the Christians in the same cell. We were all bound with chains, but our chains were to us musical instruments. And sometimes in the middle of the night we would all wake up and be so full of the joy of the Lord that we would dance around our prison cells and all clang our chains together for musical accompaniment."

Let's pray...