

Justice and mercy for the persecuted church – Acts 4:23-31, Luke 6:20-31

I wonder what your diet of news has been this week? I imagine it's mostly been a mixture of Brexit, whether we get an election, the latest happenings in Strictly and Bake-Off and of course what's been happening in the rugby. And that's all well and good. These are the things that shape our lives, both at the national level as well as our hobbies and interests, the things we do to let off steam.

We should celebrate the fact that we have access to information and entertainment, even if perhaps we should be a bit more concerned that we are at how many of our major sources of news are owned by billionaires more interested in the bank balances or themselves and their rich friends than our true national wellbeing.

But as we all know, this is not the only news. As I prepared for today's sermon, I opened my latest copy of Barnabas Aid, a charity dedicated to helping Christians around the world, and here is the news from a very different perspective:

READ ITEMS 1 to 5

Today is All Saints Sunday, a day when we want to praise God for the growth of the church and the fact that there are Christians, fellow believers, all across the world. We remember not only the generations that have gone before us, but also those who carry the flame now.

And as we celebrate the estimated 2 billion Christians of every culture, class and creed, we also want to remember that around 1 in 10 – between 200 and 250 million Christians – live in countries where there is real suffering for their faith. And you probably noticed from those few reports, that the suffering can be in many ways: alongside the most extreme fear of religious cleansing by terror groups, the persecution is at a more pervasive level – closing church buildings, control of belief, dangers in meeting together and even prosecution for declaring your beliefs publicly.

And these are not isolated pockets of the world: as we have mentioned before, it is illegal to convert to Christianity and/or own a bible in more than 50 countries, and there are many other places where, although there is nominal freedom of religion, Christians suffer in all kinds of other, hidden ways.

The uncomfortable reality is that life for these Christians is much closer to the norm in the early church than we like to admit. As we go back to our reading from Acts 4, the context of this passionate prayer by the first Christians is Peter and John's first major brush with the authorities, and the threats that were made against them. **Persecution was a reality for the church right from the word go.** They were seen as threats to the established order, a refrain which has persisted ever since.

It's bitterly ironic that a creed which preaches love of enemies, refusal to use violence or coercion, whose followers – as Jesus tells us in our gospel passage in Luke – are often poor, hungry and socially excluded should be seen as such a threat by the machinery of state and religious authority. And we need to acknowledge that part of the reason is that it's easier to hit someone who won't hit you back. But the deeper reason is that Christians serve a higher power, the true power of the universe: our very beliefs undermine all other pretensions to worldly authority.

And corrupt worldly power hates the thought that they might be wrong, that they might one day be answerable to someone bigger than they are. That's why so often they try to cloak their corruption with a veneer of divine approval – something which, again, Christians often can see right through.

And this perceived threat to other state ideologies has continued throughout the ages. This latest edition of Barnabas Aid has a very helpful article detailing the major ideologies behind persecution of Christians in the 20th century: including communism, Maoism, Islamism, and various other forms of religious nationalism. In each case, Christians are a hated minority which should be stamped out. Even in 2019 the Bishop of Truro's independent report to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office makes it clear that Christians are by far the most persecuted Christian minority across the world.

Whether it's the Kachin, Karen and Chin populations in Myanmar; or the Christian populations caught in the crossfire in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan or various other conflicts in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa; or the communist states of China, Eritrea, Laos and Vietnam; or the rapid growth of Hindu nationalism in India coupled with the fact that the Indian Christian population is now largely drawn from the lowest-born Dalit caste; or even the unnoticed repression in paradise islands like the Maldives – *there are places all across the world which suffer much more like the church in Acts than those of us in the West*. Churches which we remember today especially need God's justice & mercy.

But if **Persecution is the first P**, and one we have to acknowledge as a reality in our world, there are two other P's which give us hope. Because despite the persecution – indeed some would argue *because* of it – the church in many of these countries is growing rapidly. So **the second P which fuels this is Prayer**. How did the church in Acts respond to their predicament? They *Prayed* – READ v24. Notice who they prayed to: 'Sovereign Lord'. Where does our hope come from: 'Our hope comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth' to use the words of Psalm 121.

We know ourselves that when we're in trouble, we usually pray a lot more. Well, if trouble is not just an occasional season but your day-to-day reality, imagine what that does for your prayer life! One thing we know about persecuted Christians is that they pray. And we too can join with them. What can we do to help (basic question you may be asking)? Well one thing we can all do is *pray*. I would encourage all of you to consider getting a prayer guide for the persecuted church – Open Doors and Barnabas Fund both produce them for free, as well as other organisations too. What you don't get from our main media is detailed information on what to pray for – and these guides provide that.

Finally, **alongside prayer comes Power**. Not physical power, of course, but a different kind of power. Power to be confident in faith – v31. Power to keep loving and living a Christlike life (Luke 6:27-28). The power that holds us fast, but also testifies to the reality of what we believe. *There is no power on earth like the power of a mind that is truly free*. That has the peace that passes understanding, for whom the joy of the Lord is their strength. That is the great strength of the suffering church.

It's wonderful to baptise Grace today (what a great name) on this day / **This afternoon All Saints will host Oakley's baptism, on this day** / when we celebrate the great family of the worldwide church – there is no better day, really. But as I close, let's not forget all those for whom their baptisms bring them challenges every day – but who bear it gladly for the name of Christ. Let us recommit ourselves to helping them *however* we can – through financial generosity, advocacy and above all through prayer. As Tertullian observed all those years ago: the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

FINISH BY PRAYING PRAYER OF EARLY CHURCH – TURN TO PAGE 1096 IN BLUE BIBLES, PRAY V24-30