

11th June 2023 – The People of God #2 ‘Challenged’ (2 Timothy 3:10-15, Matthew 5:1-12)

As I sat down to write the talk this week, I’ve got two items of news buzzing round in my head. The first is... well frankly, you couldn’t make it up. One of the latest growth industries in America is, apparently, professional baby-naming consultants. The rich and famous who get pregnant will now pay up to \$30,000 to hire someone to help them name their baby! It’s not just about the perfect name, one of these consultants said in the article, it’s about ‘creating the right brand identity for the rest of their lives.’ Just let that sink in for a moment....

The second is much more troubling. I had an email news update into my inbox yesterday afternoon from Barnabas Aid, which supports the Suffering Church around the world. There has been another terrible attack in northern Nigeria: an armed militia of approximately 1,000 individuals attacked several Christian villages in Mangu County on 16th May, killing more than 100 people, burning the villages to the ground, and leaving 20,000 fleeing for their lives. This kind of attack rarely gets reported in our Western media, but it happens far more often than people think. Just in Nigeria alone, more than 11,000 Christians have been killed in these kinds of attacks since 2015. I get the Barnabas Aid and Open Doors newsletters and in every one you’ll find numerous other stories of discrimination, oppression and sometimes overt persecution of believers all around the world.

Before I return to these stories, I must confess that this is the talk I didn’t want to write. I’m really excited about this series on being the people of God, but like most people I like to focus on the positives of our faith; and I want stress at the start that we have to hold on to those: **our faith gives us hope, peace, joy, love, purpose**; it gives us a spiritual family, access to care and support and allows us to offer and learn valuable skills. We are forgiven, we have eternal life and the abiding presence of Christ in our hearts by his Spirit. Let’s never forget any of that.

But we don’t have an either/or faith – we have a both/and faith. **We have all that – and we also have to acknowledge that there is the other side, the harder side**: ‘If anyone would come after me,’ Jesus tells his followers quite bluntly, ‘they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.’ That is also part of what it means to follow Jesus – not either/or, we still have all the blessings too – but both/and. Or, as St Paul puts it: we share in his sufferings in order that we might also share in his glory (Romans 8:17).

So, to return to my two stories – is there a link between the two... well, in a funny way, there is. And the link is the very thing Jesus was talking about: **the link is the cross**. You see, the cross is our ‘brand identity’, to use the daft language of the consultants. It is the symbol which is associated with Christians across the world. We wear it round our necks, we mark it on the foreheads of our babies when they get baptised, we paint, sculpt and craft them all over our church buildings.

But let’s not forget that the cross is not a pleasant image – it’s a method of execution, an instrument of torture and death. Imagine trying to start a new faith today, and discussing what image you’d like to be associated with it. You gather as a team to brainstorm, to push the envelope with some blue sky thinking (getting into the consultant mindset here) and start to come up with images. A glowing sun, a vibrant cornfield, some beautiful cirrus drifting across the sky, a big smile, the crest of a wave. And then someone sat in the corner puts up their hand and says: how about an electric chair? Or the couch where they give lethal injections? Or the bucket they use for waterboarding? ...Which kind of kills the atmosphere in the room immediately...

...and that, my friends, is the modern-day equivalent of the cross. Something we use to torture and execute criminals. I found myself wondering whether any of those wealthy families who spend tens of thousands on a baby-naming consultant will get their child baptised – no doubt some will – and whether the minister will explain to them that when he or she marks their child with the sign of the

cross, they are conferring a **totally different identity: the identity of a crucified Saviour**, an instrument of wrongful death. I bet that would kill the mood at the baptism party afterwards, too.

But for Christians in northern Nigeria, this kind of imagery is not just symbolic, not just a mood-killer at a polite social gathering. When Jesus says that to follow him means taking up a cross, that has a visceral reality, as they look at their burned houses and dead or injured friends and family, as they flee for their lives. They understand, they live the way of the cross, each day. They don't know when the armed gangs will return; all because they worship a different Saviour, a crucified Saviour, who was just as hated by people with power as his followers are today.

We may be model citizens, and we may rightly consider that as Christians we contribute enormous social capital to the wellbeing of society. As the Emperor Justinian moaned in the 4th century: these 'followers of the Way don't just look after their own poor, they look after everybody else's as well.' But let's note that this was a criticism, not a compliment. **Our loving, holy lives may do a huge amount of good; but they also touch a raw nerve in the prideful human psyche.** There's something in lots of humans that doesn't like people doing good, tacitly acting as an affront to their own way of life. We may not judge or condemn them, we might give generously and serve humbly, but that doesn't stop us from opposition. It's even worse for the authorities, for whom our worship of a Higher Power means that they don't have ultimate control over our lives. Our freedom unsettles them, because we will never be fully *theirs*. God first, country and secular power second.

The early Christians were known as followers of the Way, and that way is the way of the cross described by Jesus. It still is. Hundreds of millions of Christians around the world still face overt persecution for their faith. We are fortunate only to experience that rarely in the West, but many of us will face subtle forms of it: exclusion from certain groups, ridicule at work or at home, negative stereotyping. Sometimes the trouble is indirect: our refusal to lie for a failing boss, our determination to stick up for a bullied colleague. Suddenly we become a threat to power, just as Jesus was.

The pages of Scripture are full of stories of the people of God being challenged; but it is as true today as ever. If you want a real, life-giving, transformative faith, you will occasionally have to confront this. So how do we deal with it? First, let's remember that **we don't go there first: Jesus walked this way before us.** It is a great comfort to know that whatever trouble we face, Jesus has been there, done it, bought the T-shirt and come out the other side. We worship a crucified and risen Saviour, who has all authority in heaven and on earth and is with us to the end of the age. And this Jesus says that those who are really blessed in this life are the people who choose to go all in for him, who face trouble for his sake. That might sound crazy, but anyone who has faced trouble with Jesus knows this to be true.

Second, **we don't go there alone. This is why we have the church, a family;** we do this stuff together. You may be the only Christian at work or at home – but we have each other, and there is great strength in numbers! Every empire in the last 2,000 years has crumbled, but the Church, that insignificant group of 120 at Pentecost with no money, no buildings and no power, has remained. It has outlasted them all. The gates of hell have never prevailed because God has decided that his kingdom will overcome – and what God decides, stays decided.

Finally, **we have the power of truth.** When Paul warns Timothy that persecution is inevitable for anyone who really wants to go all in for Jesus, he also gives him one priceless piece of advice: go back to scripture. Feast on the truths of God, because the power is in the truth and the truth will set you free. God's word has real power, and it remains both our comfort, and our weapon destroying those little lies that tell us we can't cope or this faith thing isn't worth it, and so on. God's word tells us that we are loved, saved, chosen, empowered, that God's grace is enough for every situation and the future remains full of hope. Let's claim these truths again today, and let's pray for all those who suffer for the name of Jesus – that we, and they, might overcome, to the glory of God. Amen.