

Holy Trinity Evensong 26th Jan 2020

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, 1 Peter 1:3-12

O Holy Spirit of God, give us thoughts that turn into prayer, prayer that turns into action, and action that leads into enduring life with you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our second reading [is] from Peter's first letter: this is the scene – Peter, a man of authority, writing to a wide area the size of modern Turkey and in terms of travelling time much bigger than today. Scholars argue about who was the real author, and what was the level of persecution. But whoever was writing it, he was a man of authority. Imagine you are resident in such an area, for example modern-day Europe, and receiving a letter from Stephen Marriott – who he?! But if you got one from, say Angela Merkel – you'd at least have heard of her. So the writer of the letter had authority. And the letter makes it clear that there is persecution. I doubt the Christians then would have cared about who was the author of the persecution, Nero, Domitian who cares? – it is still persecution.

But I am not leading us into an academic study of the letter. The letter is not ancient history. Persecution of Christians is alive and well and thoroughly kicking today. The Report last summer led by the + Truro for the Foreign Office startlingly records the estimate that one third of the world's population experiences religious persecution. Clearly there is persecution and persecution. In the recent past there was just one state, North Korea, where the persecution was "extreme". Now there are 11 such countries.

The report makes two other challenging points (i) the religions which are persecuted are wide ranging. Some with exotic names to my ears such as Rohingya and Yazidis, but the largest number of persecuted people are Christian, approximately 245 million Christians living in the top 50 persecuting countries suffer high levels of persecution or worse (ii) and the second point the report makes is – they are poor. The Christian faith is primarily a phenomenon of the global south - and it is therefore primarily a phenomenon of the global poor. We in our privileged echo chamber can have the wrong impression: the Christian faith is not primarily an expression of white Western privilege.

Oh dear! The size of the problem makes me quake. I think of my prayers for Syria and wonder what they yielded. I am tempted to look at passages like our first reading from Ecclesiastes, "A time to be born and a time to die" picking up

on its sense of inevitability, and say there is nothing that can be done. And just sit on my hands mumbling empty prayers.

But see there is action in the song of time from Ecclesiastes. It continues:

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal

– there is planting and harvest, killing and healing. The lesson (of the whole book) is not mumbling inactivity, rather it is not to vainly chase the wind but to depend on God. The Christian depends on and is called by God to their action. Not the vanity of the world or “chasing after the wind” as the writer of Ecclesiastes like to say.

So imagine you are in Cappadocia or sitting on the edge of the black sea in Pontus and hear Peter’s missive – Perhaps your reaction is “Oh no, not another Donald Trump tweet?!” Or perhaps you’re a touch scared and you receive a thoughtful, sympathetic, encouraging message. Today it might be via the church’s WhatsApp group perhaps.

Peter cannot stop the persecution – but he has made an effort to encourage his fellow Christians. Preaching Christ crucified, he reminds them of the cross they are called to carry; that persecution will make them refined like gold; and he goes on to praise them calling them in the next chapter a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and stones forming part of God’s temple.

But we are not Peter, an archbishop type figure able to write with authority to a large part of the world – or are we? Are we not also part of this royal priesthood? Often we simply say pray – but our opening prayer reminds us, we need to turn prayer into action.

Let me tell you about Andy Wheeler who started Common Ground at St Mary’s and regularly leads worship there. Andy has had connections with Sudan for decades. And now has been asked to be an advisor to the Shokai Bible Training Institute in North Sudan through email and annual visits. Sudan is not a comfortable place to be or have been a Christian. Since independence in 1956 the various governments have aimed to replace the African culture with Arabism and all religions, including and especially Christianity with their form of militant Islamism. This is done by building roads that for some strange reasons need to go through the middle of churches so they are bulldozed, and restricting access to education and government employment. So persecution

becomes an exacerbator of poverty. And it is in this environment that the need for bible teaching and training Christian leadership is most important to build up the Royal Priesthood in the country. Andy paints a picture of a chaotic stumbling existence, but nevertheless on budgets, which would be small change to this church, it continues to see hundreds of Christians, lay and ordained, taught and developed in their faith.

But not everyone of us is a theological educator, but we might feel called to give – giving is described by Paul in Romans chapter 12 as a gift. One of the 7 he lists as he describes us as being individual members of one body in Christ – but we may not have the money, or it may be committed elsewhere – but we could write to our MP – or become a pen pal? Writing Peter type letters of encouragement to one family or someone in prison for their faith. Or volunteer to make the problem wider known. The newsletter lists some web-sites with ideas?

So remembering our poor sisters and brothers in lands that may be far away but are still known about in this interconnected world, let us pray, that our thoughts turn into prayers, and our prayers into action.

Amen.

1014 words

Extracts from +T report

First, to understand why this Review is justified we have to appreciate that today the Christian faith is primarily a phenomenon of the global south - and it is therefore primarily a phenomenon of the global poor. Despite the impression those in the West might sometimes have to the contrary, the Christian faith is not primarily an expression of white Western privilege. If it were we could afford to ignore it - perhaps. But unless we understand that it is primarily a phenomenon of the global south and of the global poor we will never give this issue the attention it deserves. That is not to patronise, but it is to be realistic. Western voices that are quick to speak up for the world's poor cannot afford to be blind to this issue.

it is estimated 5 that one third of the world's population suffers from religious persecution in some form, with Christians being the most persecuted group.

Pew Research Center concluded that in 2016 Christians were targeted in 144 countries – a rise from 125 in 2015

Christian persecution NGO Open Doors (OD) revealed in its 2019 World Watch List Report on anti-Christian oppression that “approximately 245 million Christians living in the top 50 countries suffer high levels of persecution or worse” , 30 million up on the previous year

within five years the number of countries classified as having “extreme” persecution had risen from one (North Korea) to 11

736 attacks were recorded in India in 2017

in Iraq, largely through the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of ancient Christian communities from the Nineveh Plains, Christian numbers have slumped from 1.5 million before 2003 to below 120,000 today

Websites listed in the report

christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/report

www.opendoorsuk.org

releaseinternational.org

www.csw.org.uk

acnuk.org

Prayers

Almighty God, mother of us all, God of power and God of compassion we remember in our prayers this evening those of your people who are persecuted for trusting in you. Especially those working for and studying with the Shokai Bible Training Institute in Northern Sudan and Simon Kodi its principal.

Whether our heart-strings are tugged by Christians persecuted in far off lands, or unattractive prisoners, the homeless on our streets or the many, many other human needs we pray that our prayers will turn into action and that we will not feel so daunted by the enormity of the problems that we freeze into inactivity.

As this night draws near, we pray for those who will be awake: worrying about persecution; in pain or troubled by illness; in the dark corridors of depression; or plagued by insomnia – send the Spirit of peace we pray to quieten the fears that grip us in the wee small hours of the night.

Newsletter insert – evensong 26th January 2020

The readings this evening will be *Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, 1 Peter 1:3-12*

And the sermon will link the first chapter from Peter’s first letter to the persecution of Christians today – our religion suffers the most persecution world-wide. The figures are truly staggering. The Bishop of Truro wrote a report for the Foreign Office in the summer

(christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/report). It lists a number of charities in its acknowledgements and their web-sites give ideas of how we can help. See www.opendoorsuk.org, releaseinternational.org, www.csw.org.uk, acnuk.org.

Stephen Marriott