

The Persecuted Church

How many of you watched the rather gory BBC drama *Gunpowder*? Opinion was divided as to whether the producers had gone too far in portraying the sickening scenes of torture and execution, but what really struck me was the level of persecution of the Catholic population by the establishment, and the determination of the Catholics not to be swayed from their beliefs. The scriptwriters had managed to capture the faithfulness and spirituality of the victims as they went to their deaths.

It's rather sad that at a time when we are supposed to be aiming for a more civilised society, Christians all over the world are being punished for simply expressing their beliefs. It's difficult to understand why governments and movements feel so threatened – and yet it's a situation that Jesus foretold on several occasions.

When Jesus sent out the disciples to spread the gospel, he warned them that they would face opposition, but he also gave them encouragement – that they would be given the right words to say when needed – the Holy Spirit would be with them. In the Sermon on the Mount, the final Beatitude confers blessing on those who suffer in His name. Ultimately there is a special place in heaven for them, robed in white as they stand before the throne.

We are used to reading about persecution in the early centuries of the church; famously the Roman emperor Nero made human torches out of Christians, and the stories we know about the early Christian martyrs are so violent as to be almost unreal to us. Then we get to the Middle Ages, where persecution is even more shocking because it is one part of the church against another as the Spanish Inquisition decides that death is the only way to deal with heretics (and there is an extremely broad definition of a heretic). Whatever you may think of the Knights Templar, it is still horrifying that so many of them were burned at the stake in Paris – and even more horrifying that crowds gathered and cheered to see them suffer.

The thought that anyone can do this to anyone else and claim that it is in the name of Jesus leaves me completely lost for words. But I am also filled with admiration for the martyrs who knew that they would suffer horribly, but didn't back down from proclaiming the love of Jesus. I wonder if I would have been that brave.

And now we come to the 21st century, and persecution is no less wide-spread. Every now and then a story surfaces with sufficient prominence to attract the media – on Friday, for instance, the Today programme on Radio Four interviewed an Egyptian Christian about the suffering of the Coptic church. But very often this sad but sensitive subject is relegated to the inner pages of the newspapers, if it even gets noticed at all.

There are three main charities which deal with the persecuted church, and from them we can get a lot of information about what is going on in the various corners of the world. One of them, Open Doors, has defined four distinct reactions of Christians to modern-day persecution.

1. DIVE AND SURVIVE

In [Afghanistan](#), this is the only choice. All Afghan believers are secret converts from Islam, and dare not bring their faith to public notice. It means secret meetings, hidden Bibles (where Bibles are possible to obtain), and a constant life of looking over your shoulder.

2. REGISTER AND SUBMIT

In some places, it is possible to register a church and deal with the authorities. Depending on the conditions, this could be beneficial - although it means the state having a say in church affairs.

In [China](#) today many Christians are in state-organised churches. Over 10 million Catholics and over 20 million Protestants have taken this option. That is clearly better than the Dive & Survive option, but the state watches the churches very carefully, and if they grow too quickly they are likely to be closed down and their leaders imprisoned.

3. FLEE AND LIVE

Many believers who convert to Christianity from a tribe or another religion have to flee in order to save their lives and the lives of their families. This is particularly true of Middle-Eastern countries.

4. STAY AND DIE

In extreme cases, a Christian may simply decide that their best option is to stay and suffer the consequences. Even if it means their death.

In [North Korea](#) this has been the reality for many, many Christians. If a secret church is discovered, everyone is taken to the death camps, including all

relatives of the families - even if they have not been involved in worship activities.

I can't help wondering about the depth of faith that leads people to face this kind of persecution. How many of us would measure up to it? What would we do if suddenly Sharia law were imposed on the UK, for instance? For me it is a challenge to the strength of my belief; I like to think that I would stand up to such an imposition, but how would I handle it if my faith meant losing my job, my house or even my son? Or to put it another way, if the authorities were to haul me into court because I am a Christian, would there be sufficient evidence to convict me? We are encouraged by Paul in his letter to the Romans, which points out that whatever happens, we cannot be separated from the love of God.

One thing we can all do in this country is pray for those who are suffering persecution. That might sound like a bit of a cop-out, but we do know that God can do amazing things through prayer, and we can surround the persecuted with a greater knowledge of God's love for them if we pray. It's a bit like providing a spiritual cushion for them to rest on. Even if we can't see the benefit ourselves, we need to trust that God is using our prayers. One day our suffering brothers and sisters will know that they have not been forgotten by the free church.

In the basket on the table there are some little prayer cards. The pink ones each name a country in which persecution is rife; the blue ones have more specific prayers for individuals and situations. Please take one and keep it in your purse or pocket, and use it to pray. You might like to place it next to a burning candle as you send up your prayers. You might like to imagine what it is like for the people for whom you pray – and perhaps imagine them held in the hands of God. Or you may simply want to say a prayer several times over.

If you want to find out more about the organisations that support persecuted Christians, simply type 'the Persecuted Church' into Google, and the three main websites will come up. Open Doors deals largely with the Far East, the Barnabas Fund centres on the Middle East, and Christian Solidarity International has interests in countries all over the world. In the meanwhile, let's take a moment to open our hearts to God, to thank him for our freedom and to ask for him to strengthen our own faith and resolve so that we can help others.