

PERSECUTION BLESSING?

“Jesus said, ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’ ” Matthew 5: 10 – 11

Christians are under attack according to ‘Aid to the Church in Need’ - an international Catholic charity which gives relief to oppressed communities. This is a terrifying time for Christians in the Middle East and beyond in Nigeria, Pakistan and Sudan. In Lebanon there are 2M refugees in a population of 4.2M.

North-east Syria has seen 373 Christians who have been kidnapped by IS. The men have been separated from the women and children, and there are reports of executions. It seems similar to the Coptic Orthodox people in Egypt and Libya when 21 men were beheaded last month. In the northern summer of last year in Mosul, an Iraqi city with 45 churches, 120,000 Christians fled to Northern Iraq into the Kurdish region.

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They were given the choice – you convert or pay the huge tax to be allowed to be a Christian, or you flee, or face the sword. One family had to hand over all their cash, mobile phones etc. and even their son’s hearing aid for the battery. An old lady was left behind; she got up in the morning, the church was locked, nobody was there. This is the first time in 1600 years that there will be no Easter celebrations in Mosul.

600,000 Christians have fled from Syria – there were 2M Christians there before. 118 churches in Iraq have been destroyed. IS is engaged in ethnic cleansing of Christians. One 16 year old girl was brought in from Aleppo, Syria to a Catholic dispensary in Beirut run by the Good Shepherd sisters – 70% of the people who come for help are Muslim. She was shivering in fear Her veil could not mask the terrible agony of pack rape. It took a month for her to be able to speak.

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Prince Charles, who has produced a video on these tragedies says, ‘It is absolutely appalling what is happening to Christians – an indescribable tragedy.’ He has met with the Christian refugees in Jordan and other places and is committed to building bridges. He would like to be seen as ‘defender of faith’ not ‘*the* faith’. Sunnis and Shias want Christians in communities because they are known for bridge building between faith groups.

These Christians come from the earliest times in CE history and many are descendents from the first Christians in Rome. They have co-existed for

centuries, until today. Moderate Muslims there acknowledge that 'our families came from your families' – referring to their common father, Abraham, and his wives, Sarah, from whom Jews come, and, Hagar, from whom Muslims come – they believe. Abraham is seen to be a founding father of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

Lest we feel smug, think of the Christian Crusaders, who from 1095 to 1221 treated Muslims with more than hatred. Many Muslims were forced to convert to Christianity or be put to death. The church offered forgiveness of sins to Christians who joined the crusade warriors. The crusaders pillaged towns and cities as they stormed ahead and Constantinople was sacked. John Paul II asked in 2001, 'How can we not share, at a distance of eight centuries the pain and disgust,' We, Christians of the West today are seen by extremist Muslims to be connected to all the policies and practices of the licentious West and there is little understanding of the separation of church and state in some countries.

Now let's flip the coin and talk about Islamophobia. – an irrational fear of Islam. The way this issue is discussed today is divisive. Moderate Muslims are peace loving people. Some fundamentalist Christians are not. Fundamentalism in any group or form is very dangerous. 'Fundamentalism represents a denial of the mystery of the relationship between God and the world.' And there is an underlying fear in many Australian communities that Islamic people will do us harm. We need to ask questions about the reasons for extremism. It is so often a response to a history of repression. It is also an over-reaction by unbalanced individuals resulting in absurd violence.

What can we do about all this? By making sure that we are not territorial and control freaks ourselves within our family, friends and church. How hospitable are our hearts and minds to those outside our comfort zone? Welcoming strangers is a basic tenet of Christianity. Thankfully, Mission to Seafarers is for all - regardless of religion. But let's not leave it to them. Think of the Gospel events where Jesus dined with the hated Samaritans and tax collectors who worked for conquering Rome. Unless we live daily by gospel standards we will come under God's judgement.

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We believe that all of humanity is made in God's image. How can we live this out among Indians, Asians and Africans resident here in Pt Lincoln and EP? If we don't include these dear people in our lives as we see them down the street, smile, say hello and suggest that we have a coffee and invite them to our homes and hobbies, we are not being true followers of Jesus. We may feel nervous at first but God will help us to build bridges.

Perhaps as part of our Lenten journey this month we can do something individually about this invitation to be companions to those of different culture and faith in our own town. God will honour and bless us as a church community.

We are so blessed in our freedom to meet, given the terrible conditions of so many in our tortured world.

We are invited to think deeply about this sentence,

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.'

And we have no option but to forgive and love with our whole beings.

God help us. AMEN

material gleaned from ABC Radio Sunday Nights 1/03.15

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this Arabic letter N is the symbol adopted by Christians in the Middle East...

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