

PERSECUTION

Text: ‘... we boast about you among the churches of God, because your faith remains so steadfast under all the persecutions and troubles you endure’ (2 Thessalonians 1:4)

‘...persecution will indeed come to everyone who wants to live a godly life as a follower of Christ Jesus’ (2 Timothy 3:12)

Like some of you, I grew up in the conventional churches of Post-World War 2 New Zealand. It took me quite a while to realise that the whole of this New Testament was written by a Church under persecution. Looked at through that lens, the New Testament comes alive in a new way.

Our church in Ngaio Street is dedicated to St Alban, Martyr, who died for the Faith – 1700 years ago - on the other side of the world.

Now it can be very comforting for a well-established local church in a tolerant society to have a martyr as its patron saint. Comforting in two ways:

1. We can feel we belong to a company which is strong, committed and proven, proven in death. And this *feeling* of commitment and strength and self-sacrifice can rub off on us.
2. At the same time, we can thankfully say, ah yes, but it’s different now. *We’ll* never have to face this test.

I wouldn’t be too sure. To take one example – and it’s only one example among many – there were those in Germany a century ago who would’ve said exactly the same thing. Germany was one of the most cultured, Christian, and civilised countries in Europe – and still is. Yet you know what happened: Germany did terrible things, especially in Eastern Europe and in the Holocaust and to itself.

The genocide of six million Jews is perhaps the greatest crime against humanity which humankind has so far committed. Yet you must realise that Nazi Germans murdered as many non-Jews as Jews, mainly in Eastern Europe. And amongst these millions were countless Christians. Many of *them* died because they were Christians – including *German* Christians, who thus kept the soul of the German Church alive.

I’m now going to read to you a longish excerpt from an address, really a sermon, given by Don Kyanda, an African Christian from Uganda, at a 1978 Congress focussed on Africa. It’s a classically clear and simple statement about the Church’s need and responsibility to prepare for suffering.

‘Since persecution is promised to every believer, it follows that the Church must be prepared for rough times. “Be Prepared” is a motto which should not be left to the Boy Scouts alone. The Church must be adequate in adversity.... [and] must rediscover its true mission.... by training for uncertainty and instability.

At the moment, the Church in the West remains largely lethargic about persecution. There are five responses Christians make to persecution when it breaks out:

***1. Geographical isolation:** Many people say, “We thought it could never happen here,” as if it should only happen elsewhere.*

This view is held by people who think that they’re geographically isolated from the rest of Christendom. They refer to the enlightened leadership of their countries – sometimes to the fact that the Church is in the majority among other religions. The Church in Uganda is a majority church – accounting for about 70 percent of the population. One of the worst persecutions to have broken out in recent times is taking place in Uganda [under the dictator Idi Amin.] The fact that the Church is numerically strong does not exempt the Church from being persecuted.....

2. Historical exemption: *“We thought it didn’t happen anymore”. This philosophy or response is held by people who think that they are historically insulated from persecution. “Well, it used to happen in the past when there was a lot of intolerance and hardly any enlightenment. It can’t happen now.” Before they know where they are, persecution catches up with them, and in an awesome moment or two, history repeats itself.*

3. Theological confusion: *“Surely God is not in it”. In their prayer meetings, people with this response keep asking God to remove the persecution. Instead of praying to be adequate in adversity, they pray for the removal of the adversity...*

[Personally, I think it’s important to pray for both. Jesus taught us to pray the ‘Our Father’ which includes ‘Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil’. And He Himself also prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, ‘let this cup pass from me, but not my will but yours be done’]

4. No time to think about it: *This response is held by people who live so far away from persecution centres and whose countries have only experienced persecution in the dim past. They’ve completely forgotten that persecution is a live issue. They don’t even think of it! [Their life is too pleasant and prosperous].... Persecution [can] become more [destructive] when it breaks out in areas where people have never even thought of it.*

5. We are ready: *This reaction is held by people who will say something like this: “We’ve been praying for the last.... decade, knowing that difficult times are coming. We’re ready. May the Lord Himself prepare us.” These people and churches are prepared. They make it a definite program to prepare for this to make sure that the Church will stand and grow in times of crisis. This view is a minority view and therefore sometimes unpopular. But...it’s the...biblical one.*

A word needs to be said about the type of preparation we have to undergo if we want to face crisis with confidence. In John 15 we are told that we have to abide in the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot meet emergency situations unless we are constantly abiding in the Lord, who is the vine..

If we don’t make it a practice to abide in Him, we can’t expect that when an emergency situation arises we can plug in to Him and switch on “patience”, “forgiveness”, “joy”, “peace”. A man who hasn’t been patient all his life has no chance of being patient in times of tribulation and crisis. The same is true of forgiveness, joy and peace. These things arise out of a vital relationship with Him.

There’s no shortcut or cheating [possible] here... Suffering is an examination: in order to survive in suffering, we must prepare for it thoroughly. A life lived fully with the Lord and in the Spirit is the best guarantee for crisis times.

What practical assistance can we give the Suffering Church?

*The first biblical command is to stand by all those who are suffering. After all, when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers (I Cor.12:26). We have to remember those who are in prison as if we ourselves are in prison. **In other words, we have to identify with the Suffering Church.** I came out of Uganda with only a few possessions – my passport, my wedding ring and my watch. As soon as I got to Kenya, various Christians rallied around me and clothed me and fed me...I was overwhelmed by the love of the brethren.*

Secondly, we must count on one another. That started me on a new road in my own Christian life. In standing by those who suffer, we may not be able to do very much, but standing by them is welcome activity, for it ensures fellowship. What the Suffering Church needs from us is not pity – still less, sympathy. The suffering Christians need assistance. Sympathy without action is debilitating spirituality.

One of the most important factors that brings stability in suffering is what the Bible teaches concerning the future. None of the present tribulations or trials can be compared to the weight of glory which will be ours when it is all over....'

What Dan Kyanda is saying is straight out of the pages of the New Testament, and tested in the crucible of the 20th Century.

At this point I'll let you in on a secret. This is not a new sermon: I first preached it 40 years ago here in Eastbourne when I was Vicar. What follows now is how I saw things in about 1980. So this is NZ and Eastbourne 40 years ago, seen through my eyes.

And what of New Zealand? *[I said]*. We're fortunate, compared with our Christian brethren in many parts of the world. But I don't think we can be complacent. I see some warning signs on the horizon. So far as the freedom of New Zealanders is concerned, there's an authoritarian tendency in New Zealand society which makes people who have experienced life in Nazi Germany uneasy. For example, Jewish refugees here were disturbed by the dawn raids on the over-stayers in Auckland some years ago.

So far as the freedom of New Zealand Christians is concerned, I think we should look very hard at the fate of the main Christian Churches in Denmark and to a lesser extent Sweden – where they have been compromised and controlled to an alarming degree by a Welfare State committed to a non-Christian social morality and where the rights of Christian parents over their own children have been seriously diminished.

But right now in New Zealand society, we Christians are encountering hostility, not yet from the State, but from certain sections of New Zealand society....

At this point, in 2019, I want to interpolate that there's always a spectrum from hostility to discrimination to harassment to persecution. And that the agents of this may be society or Governments or family.

Here in Eastbourne *[I said in 1980]* I know there are two groups of Christians who encounter hostility because of their faith, hostility from those very close to them. The first is the Christian husband or wife whose partner is not a Christian believer. Now many non-Christian partners are respectful and supportive of their spouse's religious life. But all too many are actively hostile and destructive. The amount of counselling I've had to do on this issue is considerable, and growing.

And the other group of Christians I've watched beginning to encounter hostility are some of the teenagers. It's not simply that they can get a pretty rough time at school from their peers. But they can also get a rough time from one or both of their parents at home, who are threatened by the flourishing of Christian belief and practice after Sunday School age.

Both situations of hostility demand great love and sensitivity, and encouragement and support for our Christian brothers and sisters right here in Eastbourne. And they may make us more aware that we are members of a Body which is suffering active persecution in many parts of the world today, persecution which is increasing.

At this point I need to say that today, in 2019, Christianity is not only still the largest religion in the world, but has also now become the most harassed and persecuted religion in the world (closely followed by Islam). Every morning I use the Barnabas Fund prayer cycle to pray for the Suffering Church and allow myself to be confronted by the personal stories there– and it's a sobering exercise.

So three sermons in one! And I now ask you these questions:

- Has anything changed in 40 years? (I think somethings have.)

- Where are the currents of history carrying us?
- And are we ready?

I concluded with the rest of Dan Kyanda's words:

"The Church is the only institution in the world to which God is committed. God is not committed to any country or system. In eternal categories these systems do not count. The Church is the only institution that will survive the end of the world."

And today I end with the last words of Matthew's Gospel, the last words of the Risen

Jesus: *'I will be with you always, to the end of time'*

A sermon preached in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on 2 November 2019 by the Revd Canon Peter Stuart