

The way of Jesus

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Fifth Sunday of Easter—18 May 2014

Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5,17-18, 1 Peter 2:11 – 25, John 14:1-14

My friends perhaps you will be shocked to know that while I was on holiday I did not read the Bible once. Not once in 26 days. Instead I rested, read novels, moved rocks and rubble on the building site, swam and reveled in the beauty and peace of the South coast—and prayed as I walked, swam and worked. I came back to Canberra on Friday afternoon and yesterday afternoon opened the lectionary to acquaint myself with today's readings. As I delved into our readings, what struck me the most was the fear and bloodshed that is both hidden and overt. In our seemingly peaceful and prosperous nation it is easy to forget that persecution and the scapegoating of the innocent defined the beginning of the Christian faith and our beginnings were very bloody.

Hints of that persecution are there all through the four gospels, the epistles and the Book of Revelation. The persecution continued from the earliest time through to the fourth century. For hundreds of years Christians were a persecuted minority. They were abused, tortured, discriminated against and killed. It started to end when the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian and Christians got a break and some official sanction. However, it is to our eternal shame that where once the followers of Jesus had been persecuted, once they got state power they became part of the system that persecuted others. Such is the nature of the human propensity to scapegoat and blame. But if we go back to the beginning, when our foundational texts were written, Christians were the victims of state and community violence.

All our readings from today have clues about that persecution. The reading from Acts is, of course, an account of one of the first martyrs, Stephen. We come in at the end of the story but the lead up to the stoning is him telling the religious powers a string of challenging ideas. He says, among other things, that they, like all religious leaders, persecute prophets, that they are a stubborn people resisting the Holy Spirit, that they have pagan hearts and pagan ears. This is all really strong stuff and in a way it is no wonder they rise up against him and kill him. Stephen stands out and is cut down.

Our second reading, from the first letter of Peter, was written to a church whose members were Gentiles, resident aliens and household slaves in rural Asia Minor. As Christians, their very name was offensive and they could expect to endure persecution as well as milder forms of social ostracism and 'name calling'.

The writer of the letter is trying to find ways to encourage these vulnerable and powerless people in a way that will not endanger them. They must walk a fine line between proclaiming their faith and serving their masters. They must hold in creative tension the freedom that comes as followers of Christ and their duties as Roman slaves. Where Stephen is a Jew and a courageous proclaimer of the Gospel, a free man who seems to have nothing to lose, the people of the letter are a much more vulnerable group, perhaps including women and children. There is nothing to be gained by them rising up and denouncing their owners and overlords—simply violence and death. Stephen witnessed to the good news by standing up and getting fatally knocked down, at the same time praying for his persecutors. The people of the letter are encouraged to be witnesses of the Good News by quietly loving, honouring and obeying others, and in so doing following the example of Jesus who suffered terribly even though he was innocent, yet forgave his enemies from the Cross.

When we turn to our Gospel reading we find that its context was also persecution. It was

written at a time and to a group of people who were a persecuted religious minority, expelled from the synagogue, their religious home, because of their faith in Jesus. This was all part of a much wider conflict within first century Judaism. Theirs is a story of rejection and abandonment, suffering and violence.

All these events happened hundreds of years in the past. However persecution is still the context for thousands of Christians. It has been recently calculated that in the last two thousand years, about 70 million people have given their lives for their Christian faith, and of these, 45.5 million—fully 65 per cent—were in the last century. Those numbers include the Christians who perished under the Nazi regime and the persecutions of Stalinist Russia and the Armenian genocide. All these are nameless millions. But here are just a few names from the last century in other areas.

There was Manche Masemola, an Anglican catechumen from South Africa who was killed in 1928 by her parents at the age of 16, Lucian Tapiede, an Anglican from Papua New Guinea, who was killed during the Japanese invasion. There are the more contemporary stories like that of Hemanta Das, a 29-year-old Christian worker whom Hindu extremists beat to death in 2006. There are Theresia Morangke, Alfita Poliwo and Yarni Sambue, three young Christian women who were beheaded by militants in Indonesia in 2005. These are just a few among millions.

There is the story of Pastor Alexander from Cuba. He was severely beaten for refusing to work at his prison job on the Sabbath. Finally the guards gave up, decided he had mental issues, and allowed him to rest on the Sabbath. Pastor Noble said other prisoners then claimed to be Christians to get out of work. To “prove” they were Christians, they attended Bible classes taught by the pastor. As a result, many became Christians.

As you can imagine in all these stories of persecution the overriding feeling for the early believers and Christians today in places where they are persecuted would be fear—mind numbing, body freezing, fear. All humans face fear—fear of suffering and loss, fear of abandonment and death, fear of ridicule and rejection.

Yet Jesus message in the face of fear is—do not fear. In fact Jesus’ whole message, his whole life, could be summoned up by, “Do not fear—I AM”. In the first verse of our Gospel reading he says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled”. The word is *tarasso*, and it means agitation and disturbance in the face of death and evil. He says, “do not be disturbed, do not be agitated or fearful when evil is at hand. Instead—trust.” He goes on to say that in God’s house there are many dwelling places.

Although we often read ‘dwelling places’ as ‘heaven’, it is much more likely that Jesus is referring to the indwelling of himself and God, the love relationship they share. So he is saying, “Trust that where I am, you are also, and that there is room for you within God, with me. Suffering and death have no power for there is a greater reality.” His words are not about a place, but about a way of being. It is a way of being reconciled and connected with the Divine.

It is what Jesus says next that is truly confronting and in fact contains the seeds of the persecution of Christians throughout the ages. They are the words, the idea, that set the scene for the Roman authorities being completely perplexed by the Christian faith. Jesus states, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It is said that the line “I am the way and the truth and the life” is the high point of John’s theology. It is a line that is profound, life giving, confronting and deeply disturbing. They are words that set a Christian apart from others. Or do they?

Marcus Borg tells the story of an interfaith worship service where an unfortunate oversight

led to the Buddhist reader being given every passage from John's gospel. After he read it the Buddhist said, "This scripture is absolutely true—Jesus is the way—the only way that one comes to know the divine." Borg explains that what the Buddhist meant by that is that Jesus embodied the way, incarnated the way, exemplified the way and that is true of every path that leads a person to the one God of all.

So in the face of fear, in the face of suffering, it is so very important to know the way, Jesus, so that we may model our lives on that way. In a society where political correctness reigns supreme, yet where the innocent and vulnerable are demonized and targeted it is so very important to hold to the story and message of Jesus, where compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation are central. Our belief, faith and trust are key to this. We do not commit to a path without a sufficient level of trust that it is the right way.

Faith is really trust. Trust that the triune God of love that Jesus revealed is faithful and true.

If we go back to the story of the stoning of Stephen, we find a man who trusted and committed himself to the way of Jesus, a way that was ultimately revealed in his death, where he actively prayed for his murderers. Stephen did not return hatred for hatred and violence for violence. He gave back love and mercy, just as Jesus did. Through Jesus, Stephen found the Father of love and he broke the circle of violence.

We in Australia will not be called to publicly die for our faith, like Stephen of old and many Christians in other countries today. We will not have to stand before the authorities and give an account of our faith and face retribution. The worst we have to deal with is being called names, perhaps, and misunderstood. But we are called to pray for those who are facing such a trial. We are called to be true to the way of Jesus and to not be troubled in the face of ridicule and the demands of our faith. We are called to always promote and preach peace, reconciliation, love and mercy. We cannot ever, cannot ever, return fear for fear, hatred for hatred and violence for violence. We must forgive and forgive and forgive those we think have done us wrong. It is the only way to the God of love. Amen.