

TESTING COMMITMENT

NOTE

This service focused on the Persecuted Church around the world and the second Bible reading was loudly interrupted by a group of young people who ran into the church, shouting at us to stop the service, hide all hymn books and Bibles under the pews because the laws of our country had been changed, now forbidding all public Christian meetings. As the books were hidden and the Minister and Elder stood in front of the Communion Table, hiding it from view, the church doors crashed open and two men in black walked down the aisle looking for any signs of Christian worship.

Although most of the congregation did realise that this was a role play, the whole experience took them by surprise and the atmosphere was extremely tense. After the men in black had left the church, the service continued as follows:

INTRODUCTION (The Minister)

That, believe it or not, is the kind of scenario under which our Bible was handed down to us. Men and women were often in the position of having to smuggle its ancient manuscripts past enemy agents, copy them secretly and hand them on at the risk of being caught and imprisoned.

That is also the scenario under which our ancestors in the Reformed Churches met for worship. One thing many of our great hymn writers have in common: Isaac Watts, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, is that they served time in jail because it was illegal in this country to belong to a Free Churches. Both our Bibles and our hymn books then have come to us at immense human cost.

That is the kind of scenario under which countless Christian men and women are living today. All around the world there are Christians praying, meeting, reading the Bible, teaching one another in secret, risking imprisonment, torture and death.

And it is even conceivable that the time may come when we are in a comparable situation ourselves; when the causes of political correctness and racial equality become a legitimate reason for prosecuting anyone who says, *“I know the difference Jesus makes in my life and I want to share it with others;”* when hiding our hymn books and our Bibles will not be role-play but grim reality.

One of the remits of our Church and World Team is to generate support for Persecuted Christians and this is something which Anne Chatters and Brenda Sussex have been doing for some time. Anne will now speak to us about the Persecuted Church and its people in our world today.

NOTES OF THE TALK ON THE PERSECUTED CHURCH (Anne Chatters. Elder and Leader of Church and World Team)

1. Jesus said *“If they persecute me, they will persecute you too,”* and this applies to us today. There are 250 million Christians estimated currently suffering persecution for their faith.
2. What do we mean by persecution? Violence, but also misinformation, state persecution, exclusion from benefits, education and jobs,

3. ISOLATION from other believers - no access to bibles, other Christians, Christian literature, surrounded by people saying that our God is not real.
4. Where is this kind of thing happening in the world? In 2008: Saudi Arabia and North Korea where Christianity is illegal. And many other places, eg Communist countries, China, former Russian states, Cuba, Vietnam, Hindu India, the Islamic world: Middle eastern countries, the Buddhist world: Burma, Sri Lanka. And even the UK?
5. Our drama was recreation: but this is happening now: In China, the leader of a House Church and 40 co-workers at a bible study were detained and arrested by 100 officers who stormed in.
6. What can we do? Helen Berhane, Gospel singer arrested in Eritrea, spent 4 months alone in shipping container, hot in the day, icy at night... but we were there through our prayers. She writes, *"I felt supported and loved, even though horrible things were happening to me"*. God used our prayers from St. Johns and many others to be there with her. We did make a difference
7. Release International is in Orpington, on our doorstep. I believe God is calling us at St. Johns Church to support this charity helping persecuted Christians. Helen Berhane said *"I have no words to adequately express my love and admiration for all the care and love you have bestowed on us. I thank you for you have been with me every step of the way over the last 3 years ... I am convinced that it is through your prayers that I was able to survive all the trials I have faced. Together we have overcome the evil one and victory has indeed been ours"*.
8. There are many more people who need our help. Other secular organisation can do other social outreach. But if we don't help our fellow believers, who will?

CONCLUSION (The Minister)

I remember reading an epic poem by G.K.Chesterton about the battles between the Saxons and Vikings in the days of King Alfred the Great and a few of those lines always stuck in my mind. Alfred is hurling defiance at the invaders:

*Although you hunt the Christian man like the hare on the hillside
The hare has still more heart to run than you have heart to ride.
And though all lances split on you, all swords are heaved in vain
We have more lust again to lose than you to win again.*

The Christian faith has inspired the most amazing levels of courage in human beings. And I am not talking here about the politics-disguised-as-religion which led to the horrors of the Crusades or the sectarian terrorism in Northern Ireland. I am talking about people who have embraced faith in Jesus Christ in the face of a hostile society; people who have refused to bow to the pressure of family, colleagues and even Governments to give up their Christian convictions: people who believe that Christianity is worth the loss of livelihood, freedom and even life itself. Think of the early Christian who abandoned their established religions and went, singing, to their deaths in the Roman arenas; think of the reformers who chose to risk

poverty and imprisonment for the sake of cleansing Christianity from abuses and power-games; think of the persecuted Christians today who would be left in peace if they would relinquish their faith. Christianity is worth that much to them.

If we are honest, we must have moments when we wonder why it is worth so much to them. After centuries of religious tolerance in this country, we have never known what it is to be tested as these people are tested. Faith, for many of us here today, will be something we were brought up with. And yes, our faith and our commitment to our church do demand a certain amount of time and money from us, neither of which are easy to come by; and yes, we may have had to cope with some painful divided loyalties at times, but Christianity has never presented us with huge sacrifices or serious threats to our wellbeing.

So again lets' be honest- would we feel that what we gain from our faith and from this church would be worth losing our family, our home, our job and our freedom for? If the laws of this country made it illegal to meet here for Christian worship, would you risk it? When Ministers are ordained they are asked, "*Do you promise to maintain the truth of the Gospel whatever trouble or persecution may arise?*" And I doubt that there is a single honest minister who can answer that question with total confidence- "*yes of course I do.*" Most of us just cross our fingers and think, "*well I hope so.*" Would our Christian ministry really mean that much to us?

I must confess that preparing this service has forced me into some serious heart-searching. I ask myself what would it be about my faith that might just inspire me with enough courage to withstand *whatever trouble and persecution may arise?*

Is it the hope of my own ultimate salvation? Stand up for Jesus now or he won't stand up for you at the Day of Judgement? No. I don't like the kind of God who makes bargains like that. I don't want to be more scared of God than of the secret police. Is it my spiritual welfare, the sense of feeling in touch with God through the time we spend in prayer and worship? Yes, but then we can experience a certain spiritual "high" sitting on a mountainside, listening to music, spending time with people we love. So would saying our prayers by ourselves in an open field really be that much different to saying them in St John's Church, especially if we could still meet our good friends here on the golf course or at the pub.

Is it my livelihood that would hold me? After all, I earn my living as a Christian minister. But then, given the state of the URC at the moment, it is not exactly what you would call a secure living and for the rest of you, the days when the church could offer any substantial material benefits to its members are long gone.

So what, if anything, would make me hold on? What would make my faith and ministry worth risking everything for? What would hold you to your faith?

I asked then what was it that motivated Jesus to keep preaching, to keep calling men and women to follow him even though he knew that his ministry would end in torture and death and that many of his followers would share the same fate? What was it that made his mission worth it to him?

To put it in one word, it was love. It was not about what his mission would do for him but about what it would do for the world.

He saw so many people who should have been cared for by their Governments but they had been bled dry. They should have been given opportunities to develop their

gifts and fulfil their lives but they had been forced into a narrow, hopeless existence by totalitarian regimes.

He saw so many people who should have been nurtured by their religious leaders but had had heavy burdens of obligation placed upon their shoulders. They should have been encouraged to search for truth and for the living God but they were fed political policies disguised as the word of God.

He saw so many people who should have been healed when they were sick, held when they were grieving, forgiven when they were guilty, told they were loved when they were isolated but who instead were left neglected and rejected.

He saw those who should have been told that greed breeds misery; that wealth is an addiction as destructive as drugs, but who had been allowed to grow up thinking money to be the ultimate prize in life.

He saw those who should have known the God of full, total and abundant living being turned off by this dreary, fault-finding old man in the sky who was only interested in sexual morality, racial purity and how much money you put into the collection.

He saw so many people who were living by lies, lies which generated sin, misery, despair, injustice and hatred. And so he came to save the world by reconciling the human race to God. He could not turn back because too many people were depending on him. He could not give up because he could not abandon the world he loved.

And yes, when I think of the times when my ministry has seemed stale and useless to me, when I have wondered why I bother, the most frequent “kick up the backside” to get me going again has been the realisation that there are people desperately needing Christian ministry; people needing to be told the truth about God, life and about themselves; people needing a church where they can go to think and pray, to laugh and cry, to talk and listen; people needing the Christian values of love and hope, justice and peace in their lives. Even if you cannot do much, you can’t give up either.

So what would happen to us if the law changed and our faith put us at risk? Would we hold on? Would it be worth it to us? I suppose it all depends on what our Christianity is doing for us now. If it is only about what makes us feel good then worshipping in a spirit of fear and terror will not give us what we want and we’ll soon give up. But if our faith is enabling us now to see the world through the eyes of Jesus Christ; to hear the cries of the human race for the living word of God; to be as Christ for those who need him, then yes, I think that there is hope that we will survive.

And though they hunt the Christian man like the hare on the hillside, the hare has still more heart to run than they have heart to ride.

Thank God for those who hold the faith and by so doing, share the truth with us all.
Amen.