

Midweek message – 17 March 2021

Hello, I am Julian Henderson, the Bishop of Blackburn with the diocesan midweek recorded message.

I am going to pick up where I finished in my February message and talk about how important it is for us to see our situation here in the U.K. in perspective and particularly in the light of what it is like to be a Christian in other parts of the world today and in our Anglican Communion.

Apostle Paul puts it most clearly in 2 Timothy 3.12 where he writes: In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And it is right that being faithful to Jesus and the teaching of the Scriptures will not make us popular in the eyes of those around us who do not believe. We only have to listen to the accounts of what happened to Him, as we shall hear very soon in the days of Holy Week leading up to His betrayal, arrest, trial, torture and execution, where we will be reminded again of how He was treated when He was here on earth.

And we also only have to listen to the regular reports in the news of Christians being killed in our own day because they are Christians. The most recent I've heard is from March 7th, when 24 Ethiopian Christians were killed, including their two ministers, and their church building was burnt to the ground. No wonder those who have survived said: 'we are living in utter fear day in and day out'.

And such persecution is not an isolated one off, but a repeated pattern of behaviour seen in many parts of the world. The report by the Bishop of Truro for the government, two years ago Easter 2019, highlighted the extent of the suffering of the Christian community and the deafening silence of most.

Five years earlier in 2014 'The Times' published an editorial entitled 'Spectators at the Carnage'¹. It began in these terms:

Across the globe, in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Christians are being bullied, arrested, jailed, expelled and executed. Christianity is by most calculations the most persecuted religion of modern times. Yet Western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril.

We cannot be spectators of this carnage.

Yet somehow this injustice and lack of outrage persists. We should be calling out the needs of our brothers and sisters in the faith, making a fuss about the ongoing tragic loss of life and denial of the freedom to speak and believe.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in Article 18 defines religious human rights in this way:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance. (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, let's pray for and speak up for our sisters and brothers wherever they are, for God's mercy and protection, for their right and courage to live as Jesus commanded. Easter tends to be a time for targeting Christian acts of worship. For ourselves, let's be grateful for the freedoms we enjoy and make more of them. I remember 40 years ago a Christian was visiting the UK from the then communist bloc with all the restrictions they had to live with, and they kept repeating, if only we had your freedoms. I've never forgotten that gentle rebuke.

Let's not be afraid to speak up and out about Jesus and His teaching, even if that lands us in some kind of trouble. I fear too often our comforts and the lack of opposition we face are down to our silence and fears.

As we approach Holy Week let's remember we worship and serve Someone who was persecuted and pray for the courage to follow in His footsteps, the request in our diocesan vision prayer, and let's make the most of our freedoms and take the risk of talking about our faith, and possibly inviting someone to join us in our Holy Week and Easter services. And let's pray for the protection and then support the Christian community in other parts of the world, especially in this holy season, and all in the glorious hope of the resurrection and fulfilment of God's purposes for His world.

Thank you for listening.