

An Indelible Mark

I wonder what you have most been looking forward to with the end of lockdown? This Monday saw one step that will have brought joy perhaps to some of the younger adults who live in our Diocese - the reopening of tattoo parlours.

Now I have to confess that I've never really been tempted to have a tattoo, although when I was a prison chaplain it was quite a big issue among prisoners who became Christians. Many of them had homemade tattoos and I was often asked for my interpretation of Leviticus 19.28, a verse which commands the Israelites not to put tattoo marks on themselves. It's a verse which comes just after a verse commanding the Israelites not to cut the hair at the sides of the head or clip off the edges of the beard, which seemed to attract less attention.

A tattoo is one way of permanently reminding yourself of your commitment to another person. In England it is often the name of a girlfriend or partner that people choose to have inked on their skin. But when I spent time in Egypt a few years ago, visiting monasteries belonging to the ancient Coptic Orthodox church, I noticed that many of the Coptic Christians I met had the sign of the cross tattooed on their wrist as a very visible sign that they belonged to Jesus and as a reminder of their baptism.

In Egypt having such a tattoo is a very bold witness to your faith, and it is one that may one day cost you your life. When periodic persecution takes place and Christians are attacked and killed, the sign of the cross on the wrist is one of the things that Islamist extremists look for to identify the Christians they want to kill.

In last Sunday's Diocesan online service we were reminded that persecution is a fact of life for Christians in many countries today. Dr Anderson Jeremiah, a priest from the Church of South India, spoke movingly of the attacks on churches and Christians by Hindu extremists, and how Christians continue to gather to worship Jesus, undaunted by the risks.

Remembering the witness of my Coptic friends in Egypt, I am struck by another verse in the Bible, in Isaiah 49.6, which speaks of how God loves us so much that he has chosen to have our names indelibly engraved on his hands. 'Even if a mother may forget the child she has borne, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.' God loves you so much that he has written your name on his hands forever.

What about you and me? How much do we love God, and how courageous are we in giving public witness to our Christian faith? We may not be planning to have the cross tattooed on our wrist as Coptic Christians do. But may their unflinching devotion and courage be an example to us in the West who are often timid about our faith. Are we willing to stand up and be counted for our faith in Christ today, and are we stand in prayer alongside those who are persecuted for their faith today?

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