

WEEKLY SERMON

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Inspired by the courage of the Early Church

Since Easter the New Testament Lectionary readings have been passages from the Book of Acts. Written by Luke, the Book of Acts records the lives of the disciples after the events of Pentecost, the conversion of Paul and the spread of Christianity across the known world at that time. Throughout the period covered by Luke and for a further 300 years the members of the early church were hunted down and persecuted. For 300 years! That is a long time. What courage, what perseverance and what faith. So sure, were they, that what they knew and believed about Jesus was true they did not give up. They did not change their minds and take an easier route through life. So sure, was their belief that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah the one who died and was resurrected that they continued to preach the good news of God's love and forgiveness. Despite the fact that they could be arrested, and imprisoned, those early Christians were so on fire with the Holy Spirit that even the strong possibility that they could be thrown into the arena with lions, didn't stop them. For 300 years! That is a long time.

So, when we stop and take time to reflect on this fact, we should truly wonder at the miracle that the good news of the saving grace of Jesus has reached our ears and transformed our lives over 2000 years later. This year in particular I have been really challenged by the faith and courage of those early Christians because I encountered a stark reminder that Christians are still being persecuted, still persevering, and not giving up their faith. Being a Christian living in the UK is relatively easy. Apart from the occasional mocking voice we can go to church, pray, study the Bible, and preach the Gospel without fear. It is easy to forget just how hard it was for the members of the early church and for those Christians living in many countries around the world today.

A couple of weeks ago a friend of a friend in Nigeria was kidnapped. For no reason other than she is a Christian. Her friends and family expected that she would be killed and dumped on the roadside. However, prayers were answered and after the payment of an extremely large amount of money the lady was released and allowed to walk home, in the dark through the bush. Incidents like this are not uncommon in Nigeria because extremist groups want to eradicate Christianity from the country. The persecution of Christians didn't stop in 313AD when Constantine declared it the faith of the Roman Empire, it is still happening today. 340 million persecuted Christians around the world need our prayer and support. You can find out more on the www.opendoorsuk.org website.

In conclusion, I feel that as we read the events in the Book of Acts, we need to remember what a privilege it is to be able to gather in our churches to worship without fear. Next time we are nervous about sharing the Gospel message with those around us we need to remember the courage of the early church and we need to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who are at risk today because they love Jesus and so sure is their faith, they will not give him up.

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