

Matthew 16: 21-28 Romans 12: 9-21 – Faith of Martyrs
Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for 30/08/20

‘The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church,’ wrote prolific Christian author Tertullian early in the 3rd century AD. Persecution was the experience of the early church. Persecution is how it grew. It came from Jews and Romans, from official bodies and from mob violence. According to church tradition of the original 12 disciples, 10 were martyred, with only St John living to old age. It’s not surprising, therefore, one of the constant themes of the New Testament is how to live through persecution. The Gospel writers record Jesus as not only predicting his own death but telling his followers that this is what they should expect too. When he said, ‘Anyone who would come after me must deny themselves and take up their cross;’ and, ‘anyone who wants to save their life must lose it,’ his words came true all too literally for many through the first two or three centuries of Christianity.

Indeed, we know all too well that persecution does not only belong to history. Around the world today, persecutions continue (not only of Christians, of course, but it’s about Christians I’m talking today). I don’t have figures to back this up, but it’s often said Christians are the most persecuted minority in the world. *Barnabas Fund* is one of the organisations that works with the persecuted church. Their news magazine brings stories that are both harrowing and heroic, of suffering and faithful people, many of whom show remarkable joy and love for others in the middle of their troubles. One example: Pastor Lawan Andimi of Chibok in north-east Nigeria was a convert from Islam and became a powerful evangelist. He suffered multiple attacks from Boko Haram extremists, was abducted on 2 January this year and martyred 18 days later. Before his death, he was able to send a video message to his family: ‘Thank God for everything ... I have never been discouraged because all the conditions you find yourself in are in the hands of God. By the grace of God, I will be together with my wife, my children and my colleagues. If the opportunity has not been granted, maybe it is the will of God.’ Such refusal to be discouraged is the basis for hope that today as in the first century, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.’

Let’s move to something more mundane: getting your hair cut has been one of the great challenges of lock-down. In the absence of barbers and hair-dressers, many of us were reduced to making attempts on our own heads. For some, the top of the head did not present a difficulty, but I found the sides more challenging and back nite-on impossible. Obviously, you need a mirror to see what you’re doing, but it’s still tricky: you have to look right to move left, and look forward in order to go back. Then you start worrying for your ears as well! It’s like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice through the Looking Glass*, where Alice enters a back-to-front world: you decide where you want to go, then have to set off in exactly the opposite direction.

I sometimes think listening to Jesus must have felt exactly like that – your world turned upside down and back to front. Today’s reading follows directly from last week’s, Peter had correctly identified Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, an amazing revelation. The next thing he’d expect to happen, in a right way round world, is that they’d make plans to gather supporters, then storm Jerusalem, take control of the Temple, and throw out the Romans.

Instead, Jesus starts talking quite calmly about being arrested, and suffering, and even being killed. Peter shouts at him: stop it! Don't be defeatist! You'll put everyone off! How can you build a supporter base if you keep saying we're going to lose? But Jesus is adamant: don't tempt me to the easy way – that's the voice of Satan. The way to real victory is through apparent defeat; the way to vindication is through humiliation; the way to life is through death – that's a back-to-front world!

We are familiar with the path to the cross and know the empty tomb follows. What's much harder is allowing our whole life-styles to be shaped by Jesus' upside-down approach to life. It surely is the hardest challenge of Christian living. Paul spells it out in Romans 12. He begins, 'Offer your bodies as living sacrifices...' – very similar to Jesus' 'take up your cross.' Then he expands on what it means. 'Love' sums it up: love sincerely, sacrificially – but 'love' can mean many things. So Paul spells this out: think of others, share with the needy, practise hospitality – all the things we'd expect.

But what keeps popping up through these verses is something more: it's about loving under provocation; loving when faced with opposition and aggression; loving your enemies, praying for your persecutors. Refuse to inflame a quarrel. Don't insist on having the last word: otherwise the quarrel will never end. That's tough, especially if you're genuinely persecuted, but even with the minor slights of everyday life. It goes against human instinct to hit back. But we must respond with good in the face of evil.

A couple of riders: this is not saying we should all be doormats. It's not saying we should accept all abuse and bad behaviour. Bad behaviour needs to be called out and shown to be unacceptable. But do so out of love for the other person: and find ways that there's a chance they will accept. Secondly, it's not saying there should be no system of justice: public authorities are called to represent God's justice on earth for the good of all. But like divine justice it must be tempered with mercy and never be vindictive. And it does seem to me we should have a natural preference towards approaches like restorative justice, and certainly not punishment for punishment's sake. It won't always work, but the principle is: 'Overcome evil with good'.

Finally, the last sentence of the Gospel reading often causes confusion: 'Some of you standing here today will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' People assume this about Jesus' Second Coming, but remember where Matthew's Gospel is heading – to the mountain top in Galilee, where the risen Jesus gathers his followers and announces: 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me, therefore go...' All authority: this is the coming of his kingdom, his vindication, his victory, and the disciples witness it. He is revealed here as the true Messiah, king not just of Israel but of the world. The disciples become messengers of the gospel to announce his rule. The world hasn't yet recognised him, which means to the world his way of living will seem back-to-front and upside-down. But those who stick with it will find his is the right way up all along. And the faith they've shown in their witness will be seed for the on-going growth of the church.