

Third Sunday after Easter 2019

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Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice...”

Shortly after Easter, an interim report was published into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s support of persecuted Christians.¹ Chaired by the Bishop of Truro, and commissioned by the Foreign Secretary, a distinguished and expert committee has heard evidence and received submissions from all over the world, with a particular focus on the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia. The submissions were so lengthy and various that the publication of a final paper has been delayed until June.

It is now well-known that Christians make up the most persecuted religious body in the world. The statistics emerging particularly from the Middle East and North Africa are staggering. Since the rise of ISIS, what was already a gradual but steady decline of the traditional Christian presence in its ancient heartlands has turned into what seems as if it may be an unstoppable exodus. In Syria the Christian population has declined from 1.7 million in 2011 to below 450,000 whilst in Iraq, Christian numbers have slumped from 1.5 million before 2003 to below 120,000 today. Beyond the straightforward human tragedy of homes destroyed, family members abused and killed, and vast numbers of displaced people contributing towards the largest mass movement of humanity since the end of the Second World War, the loss of plurality in these regions is also a cultural disaster.

The setting up of the Foreign Secretary’s review into this global phenomenon was not entirely uncontroversial. Some see it as the attempt of a government in free-fall to bolster its credentials with a certain kind of political worldview, whilst others point towards the persecution of different minorities, religious and otherwise. In China, up to a million muslims are currently interred in so-called “re-education camps”, anti-Semitism has once again reared its head even in mainstream European political parties, and harassment and threats are frequently the lot of Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan. One could go on. There is clearly no monopoly either on pain or persecution, nor is there one clear explanation of such violence. There are certainly competing truth claims in some

¹ <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/interim-report/>

religions which can result in the attempted annihilation of the other, but in historic pogroms and persecutions as much as contemporary ones, motives are mixed and actors varied.

This interim report makes the point that any focus on Christian persecution must not be “to the detriment of other minorities” but should rather support them and raise the profile of their own struggles. In all this, it is surely the role of Christian leaders to discourage religious groups from pitching themselves against each other, whilst equally resisting the lazy assumption that somehow all religions point towards the same vision of God or can be syncretised into straightforward common narratives.

The quote from this morning’s second lesson with which I began this address is taken from a body of material in St John’s Gospel frequently used by some Christians to develop an absolute binary between Church and World. At its most extreme this leads some Christians into assuming that in God’s providence the decline of Christianity in the West somehow signifies that the Church is called to become smaller and purer – Church set up *against* world, Christians removed from what Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* calls “these naughty times.”² It also, of course, foments the belief amongst some that Christians are persecuted in the so-called liberal West in the culture wars rejoiced in by religious neo-conservatives. This model, an “in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world” archetype, is doubtless one facet of the tradition. But scripture itself offers much richer, broader resources than this, and proposes mutual commentary on different images of the church as upon much else. A Christian fortress mentality reveals a brittle, arrogant church, which ignores the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world around us, and fails to appreciate how the communion so fundamental to creation itself is an activity of God in Christ. Some years ago, I asked a Bishop from one of the most dangerous parts of north-west Pakistan what evangelism looked like in his context where conversion frequently resulted in death. The response of this holy man was candid and simple. He said that his small Christian community was among the first on the scene of natural disasters and tragedies, offering medical support, distributing food, simply being alongside the poor and displaced. Living the Gospel in his context was more powerful than talking about it.

Eight hundred years ago this August, an extraordinary meeting occurred. It was in the midst of the Fifth Crusade, the stronghold of Damietta in Egypt had been seized by the Sultan’s armies, and around 5000 crusaders slain. St Francis of Assisi, and his assistant Illuminatus, crossed the enemy lines with the intention of speaking to the Sultan himself. They were captured and beaten, but

² Act V, Line 91

eventually brought before Sultan Malek al-Kamil, nephew of the great Saladin himself. St Francis greeted the Sultan with a greeting of peace, similar to that which the Sultan would have uttered, and the two proceeded to develop an affectionate respect with which they proceeded to discuss the spiritual life and one another's beliefs. Although many have attempted to reconstruct the dialogue and enlarge upon sketchy diverse traditions, we know few explicit details about this remarkable meeting.³ However, the two friars stayed several nights in the camp, left with gifts, and were given safe passage. We are told that the encounter changed the Sultan, who began to treat Christian prisoners with kindness, and sought peace with the crusader armies.

William Dalrymple's account of travels through Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and the Holy Land recorded in his magnificent book of 1998 *From the Holy Mountain* recalls villages where Christians and Muslims not only lived side by side for centuries but in some cases shared worship spaces and had common sites of pilgrimage. Not only do Christians and Muslims have shared culture and philosophy – it is, for example, through the Arabic sources that St Thomas Aquinas knew about Aristotle – we also share some theological convictions. In February, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar signed a Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, which contains some extremely important reflections on the nature of God and God's relationship with creation, human dignity, fraternity and freedom, and – perhaps in the spirit of St Francis and the Sultan – encourages “the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”⁴ Pope Francis and the Grand Imam affirm the need for mutual protection of places of worship, and insist that “the Creator who has formed us with His divine wisdom... has granted us the gift of life... It is a gift that no one has the right to take away, threaten or manipulate to suit oneself.”

The life which human beings share is a participation in the lavish creativity of God. We know its beauty, in part, by its fragility. For Christians, the martyr shares in the passion of Christ and in the glory of his resurrection: early Christians delighted in seeing a typology for Christ in the Joseph Cycle, a portion of which we heard read earlier in today's service. Thrown into a well, left for dead, sold into slavery, and yet in God's providence sent to preserve life in Egypt before was he reconciled to those who persecuted him out of jealousy, and because he was a “dreamer.” We might say, maybe anachronistically, that Joseph was hated – in part – because of his *faith*. Early

³ See John Tolan's recently published *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, OUP, 2019, for an overview of the traditions.

⁴ See <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-declaration-with-al-azhar-grand-imam.html> for the official English translation

Rabbinic commentary⁵ refers to Joseph as “ha-Tzadik” (the righteous), because at this end of the story he was able to put aside his pain and desire for revenge whilst offering reconciliation to his brothers. The dreamer is able to transcend what has been portrayed in that tradition as his previously narcissistic self, avoiding telling his Father of his brothers’ crimes, whilst opening up a reconciled future.

Our response to religious persecution must be to offer a vision of, and work towards, that reconciled future. To build friendships, seek genuine understanding, and encourage the transformation of complex societies and political cultures, reminding the world of the inexhaustible sanctity and beauty of diverse human life.

Jesus said, Ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.

⁵ Such as the Genesis Rabbah (c300-500 CE)