

Trinity III

July 3, 2022

I Pt. 5:5-11

If I say the word, “church”, I think most of us would picture St. Joseph’s first and then the local gathering of Christian churches around us. This morning, our field of view expands **globally** with the First Epistle of Peter.

Last year, 360 million Christians were living in places infected by high levels of persecution. Six thousand of our brothers and sisters were killed confessing Jesus; five thousand churches and missions were disfigured or put to the torch. The same number of believers were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned.

What motivates persecution against us? In India and Niger, to be a Christian is to claim an identity not native to the dominant culture. Christians are seen thereby as weakening the fabric that holds traditional culture together. In Pakistan, laws are informed by Islam. We Christians do not have a national religion, but our beliefs are held to threaten the stability of its authoritarian theocracy and so our brethren are under close surveillance, even by their neighbors..Christians may not use Iranian languages at worship, but must employ non-Iranian language, so the gospel cannot be grasped in the fullness of understanding that comes in hearing one’s native tongue. Poignantly, I know that there is a young Christian woman educating young adults in Indonesia. She has always wanted children; she decided to surrender that lifelong dream..for any child of hers will automatically be a child of Islam.

One could argue that the darkest end of the spectrum of persecution is to be found in Afghanistan these days. Here, there were already precious few freedoms left for Christians to lose when the Taliban assumed control last summer. Young Taliban recruits go door to door in the hope of arresting a Christian in hiding. Did you know that our brothers and sisters there are the last to receive food relief or any emergency supplies? If one newly baptized into Christ is apprehended, their immediate family, clan or tribe has got to save itself by disowning the lost sheep believer, or killing him.

Now we're in San Mateo County. If I, newly shaven and in my dog collar, enter Safeway with a smile, I have seen some truly startled faces. A father standing with his three children shook his head when I looked their way. Having enquired what I do Sunday mornings, a most enlightened lapsed grande dame looks down her nose at my response. I am coming to know the feel of polite contempt when I encounter it, but right now, locally, it is probably more accurate to say we Christians here are between being worthy of being ignored and labeled an annoyance.

So what we can see is a spectrum of ongoing persecution with we who currently represent an annoyance at one end, and our sisters in Afghanistan an anathema to their countrymen at the other. I submit to you that there is not a long way ...or a long time... between living as an annoyance at one time and being worthy of annihilation at another.

Beloved, this letter of I Peter, was written for us at this time if there ever was a time. The author addresses the suffering that is mounting in several churches in Asia Minor. Christians at that time suffered vicious persecution, most commonly for not participating in pagan culture. We are

talking about persecution at the extreme end of the scale. These Christians in Peter's congregation are afraid, anxious, assaulted, and on the verge of leaving their brothers and sisters. What might initially have seemed just a conflict between competing viewpoints or a matter of cultural misunderstanding has "morphed" into a matter of life and death. How is God's word to guide His people here?

Peter has to address what we want addressed. Can this trending of the world against the church be really happening? What does this mounting hostility toward Christians mean, and why should it be occurring? Secondly, while we wait for Jesus to return, has Peter found pastoral insight into how to live the faith to God's glory day by day in the face of our detractors?

Yes, persecution is happening..the good news is that is MEANT to! It's not as if Jesus hasn't warned us: as His kingdom draws ever nearer, it at the same time provokes the powers of evil and gathers them into an unholy alliance under Satan's wings. "Suffering will occur whenever the Christian community takes seriously its commitment to God. The reason is that in making that commitment, they also align themselves against the ultimate forces of evil and hence can expect unremitting hostility" ... What to do?

"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God." The word "humble" as it used here means "ALLOW yourselves to be humbled", accept your humiliations which the circumstances of the 1st century then as now bring..Allow ourselves to be put down and humiliated by those who cannot stomach the name, Jesus?

The "mighty hand of God" is an expression that only occurs in the New Testament in this one particular verse. That's a clue to take notice. In the Old

Testament, it is regularly used as a figure for God's power to save, as in the deliverance of His chosen people from bondage in Egypt. That hand is mighty most especially because it is RELIABLE... God protects His people by his hand. With it, He prunes us to His liking..By His hand, He raises His Son. Peter's point is that we should accept the obstacles our enemies present as from His hand..as in the sense of the third petition of our Lord's prayer..in submission before God, and that without bitterness or thoughts of retaliation. The humble attitude being called for here is not self-abandonment nor resignation to what seems inevitable, nor of accepting being put in one's place, but rather of entrusting ourselves and our fates to God's care in the most radical sense, to LET GO into the MIGHTY HAND we cannot see.

Beloved, to find strength in extreme trial, we lean on Christ's example to bring us through it. The fate of Christ suffering, crucified, and exalted is the reason Christians may accept their humiliation. They do so in the sure and certain knowledge that such persecution represents neither rejection by God nor their final fate at His hand.

We may be on the milder "annoyance" end of the persecutory spectrum, but, how do we conduct ourselves day to day if and when things get worse..how do we "maintain" strong faith in the meantime? What mindset, or "heart-set", could we adopt so as to allow the heat of persecution to be transformed into the warmth of joy?

He says, "All of you be subject to one another and be CLOTHED with humility." The acquisition and exercise of virtues in such a way that they **shape one's self presentation to another** is often expressed in early Christian teaching as the putting on of clothing. But a rare verb is used here.

The act of dressing becomes a tight “binding around”, and the garment becomes the work apron of shepherds and slaves. Christians dress as persons who place the other higher than himself and serve the other.

So as a means of maintaining faith -and maybe even as an EXAMPLE to one’s persecutors- what Peter offers as an attitude to try on, as it were, is the mind set of one who knows in an elementary way that he or she is GIVEN to that person as a spiritual blessing...Given to another person as a spiritual blessing ..Take that in for a second..THAT” heart-set” could change everything. It already UPLIFTS us.. to focus less on what the world is taking from us and more on what we Christians can give to other human beings in it. After letting go all one’s future into the mighty hand of God, one’s present is to be lived as if confined to a tight fitting servant’s apron..**wrapped like a gift.**

We can already see the fruit of such an attitude in the photos from Pakistan downstairs. From the simple act of giving oneself with an old sewing machine, these poor Christian women are not only to be delivered from poverty but strengthened for persecution. Their mutual giving to one another was apparently so attractive that we heard the first few Moslem women are joining. ALL these women can be delivered from fear of one another...When a nucleus of Christian people can be seen by their enemies to get on THAT well together, it is going to draw all kinds of interest..all kinds of curiosity..Persecutors will ask themselves how can THIS be?. And the truth might dawn on them: Jesus love is disarming.. For the increase of love, do we clothe ourselves for one another in the servant cloth Jesus wore to the Cross?

If in order to increase in love we need to suffer, blessed be these our coming trials. Come, Lord Jesus, Come.