

A CHURCH WORTHY OF PERSECUTION?

Reading: Acts 6:8-7:5 “Stephen then gives a long account of the history of the Patriarchs, Moses and Israelites, which you can read at home” and Acts 7:44-8:7.

Introduction

I first became a Christian when I was working at what is now the European Central Bank, where central bankers from many EU nationalities worked together to introduce the Euro. As soon as I was baptised in 1997 I felt God tell me to set up a prayer group there, so Christians could get together and pray, not least for the institution and its leaders. In England that would be a matter of no controversy, there has always been a Christian Union at the Bank of England. But in many Continental countries, the tradition is of a strict, fanatical separation of church and state, and rabid opposition by many people to Christianity. So once I sent an introductory email to all staff an “email war” broke out with a lot of opposition and cynicism about my initiative. In the end we met anyway, but it gave me just a small taste of how our faith is opposed. The most telling comment came from the wife of my German Christian friend who said “if it caused that much trouble, you must be doing something right....”

Would you like to talk to your neighbour for a minute about any opposition you have faced – or lack of it?

Jesus said, “in this world you will have trouble, but fear not, I have overcome the world”. And, he also said, “if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”. And Paul said “we also rejoice in our sufferings” The Christian life is not supposed to be cushy! Today we have heard how the early church met opposition in a big way. We are going to trace why the early church was persecuted, how and with what consequences. I think what God is telling us is that the early church was “worthy of persecution”. It stood up for Jesus sufficiently to arouse opposition. The persecuted church around the world is in the same boat today.

But what about us? Here’s the challenge of the sermon. A comatose church that’s a holy huddle rarely has trouble because it does little to advance the kingdom. In a war, it’s the front line troops who meet combat. Isn’t that where we all should be? Are we? I know some of us are, but I have to say upfront that I’m not. I had to dredge my memory for this case of mild opposition. And I think I am in the majority. In the Thursday evening prayer group this week, God gave one of us a picture of a chain, like a mayoral chain of office, signifying matters of great importance, but it was tarnished and dull. God revealed to us that it signified a church that has “forsaken its first love” of Jesus, like the church in Ephesus of Revelation 2:4. Could that be PBC? The story of Stephen shows how a church can be worthy of persecution, and spread the kingdom. And the upcoming 24/7 prayer week gives huge opportunities for us to hear from God how we can move forward into the “front line”. I ask you to bear this challenge in mind as I speak.

Why opposition?

Why the early church met opposition can be seen in the character of Stephen. We have heard in the reading how he was full on for God “full of God’s grace and power”. He had mighty spiritual gifts, he did “great wonders and miraculous signs among the people”. Besides his own rhetorical abilities, God was with him, the text talks about the “wisdom and Spirit with whom he spoke”. He didn’t clam up when challenged on his faith, he was “always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). And as we see in the trial he was willing to bother the consciences of his hearers for their salvation, big time.

Wouldn't you like to be like him, so bold, so wise, so Christ like? God certainly wants us to be "full of his grace and power". Sometimes we don't talk of God spontaneously because we lack experience of his power in our lives – but 24/7 will, I believe, change that for many of us. And here's a further encouragement, he wasn't an original apostle, but was one of the deacons selected to free the apostles from "neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables". He was engaged in food distribution, administering the emergency larder in other words. So when you are asked to do what seems a menial duty in the church, it can be the start of something big in your spiritual life! But that doesn't happen automatically. Once started in service we need to seek God's grace, the Holy Spirit's power, his anointing to be an instrument for God, to advance his kingdom. Pray for this in your time during 24/7.

Who persecuted the early church? It was a group of Jews, the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. They argued with Stephen, but it didn't stop there. Once they lost the argument they "secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God"". They stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They produced false witnesses....

Was all this just due to men and their opposition to the ideas of the early church? I think not. Ephesians 6 reminds us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Satan works on men to inspire such evil and lies to seek to destroy the church, including PBC. We too will face both human and spiritual opposition when we stand up for God like Stephen did. If we don't, Satan won't bother with us and we'll have a quiet life – but is that what Jesus wants?

How opposition?

How we face opposition is also foreshadowed here – Christians are or should be on trial, even as Jesus was. Some theologians say that the whole Gospel of John can be seen as a cosmic trial, but with a difference – the world thought it was judging Jesus, but in fact God was judging the world for its reaction to Jesus.

Look at how this also played out in Stephen's trial. Even before he spoke the Sanhedrin saw that "his face was like that of an angel", shining like Moses when he came down from Sinai, so powerful was the Holy Spirit within him. And Stephen, bold and open to God, spoke God's words. To seek to save his opponents from damnation. He knew how the Jews love to hear of their glorious history and the way God has blessed them as his chosen people. So he gave this sermon on all the Jewish history, but with a twist – to highlight the times they ignored God's call. In refusing Moses as a leader...in erecting a golden calf as an idol.... and as we heard, in persecuting the prophets and finally killing Jesus, the saviour of the world

Let's hear it again, the climax of Stephen's speech "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.". The Sanhedrin, inspired by Satan, thought they were trying Stephen, but they were themselves on trial before God, and so was Satan.

We also, when we face trouble due to our faith, are in such a trial. But we are not alone. It is Jesus' promise to all of us "whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit." Jesus is with us, faithful and true. The trial we are in needn't be in a court. It could be just a

family quarrel about Christianity with unbelieving relatives over the Christmas table. Or a dispute with a spouse who resents you going to church. It may not be in words, but just through their resentment at your Christ like behaviour. Why do they feel so challenged? It's not you. It's because God is challenging them implicitly or explicitly, through your words or your being Christ-like, they know that by refusing the claims of Jesus on their lives, they too are resisting the Holy Spirit! That is surely an encouragement to you who suffer this way. But if you never experience such times you have to ask yourself – why?

Consequences of opposition

What are the consequences of opposition? See what happened to Stephen. All semblance of a legal trial was abandoned, and though the Sanhedrin had no right to execute anyone, they became a lynch mob, dragging Stephen out and stoning him. But things go much deeper. Look at how the mob is described in terms redolent of hell. “Furious and gnashed their teeth”, “yelling at the tops of their voices”. While Stephen has heavenly visions “full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And his last words are those of Jesus Christ himself "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And then he fell asleep. I believe he came to in the arms of Jesus, hearing the words “well done, good and faithful servant”.

This is a sheer confrontation of heaven and hell. Satan was doing his worst, to seek to destroy all that Jesus had accomplished. Stephen dies as the first Christian martyr, but alas not the last. There were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than at any other time in history. Listen to this testimony to the US congress in 2002 from Soon Ok Lee, a former communist who escaped from North Korea “In the spring of 1990, I was carrying a work order to the cast iron factory in the male prison," "Five or six elderly Christians were lined up and forced to deny their Christianity and accept the Juche ideology of the state. The selected prisoners all remained silent at the repeated command for conversion. The security officers became furious by this and killed them by pouring molten iron on them one by one." 45 million Christians may have died for their faith last century. I don't believe we can expect this century to be much better.

And Satan's work went on, from killing Stephen to attacking the wider church “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.....Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

We need to be ready to face such persecution, as the church has through the ages and as the suffering church around the world does even today. In Britain I believe the “political correctness” wave and legislation for actions abhorrent to Christians such as hybrid animal/human embryos is only the start. Today in Britain under SORS Christians can no longer offer adoption services unless they are willing to transgress what the church through the ages has seen as Biblical teaching. Are we ready to face persecution? Will we be like Peter of the Gospels and run away, or like Stephen and face it?

So much for the negative aspects. Even in domestic cases of opposition, like within the family, consequences of opposition seem bleak. We face trouble as Christians, and it seems feels like we have failed. No one is listening, they may even have been set back in their faith by our arguments. And we face ostracism, rejection, mocking, even violence. Satan has won again, and we feel unwilling ever to stick our necks out again. And yet, and yet.....”the darkest hour comes before the dawn” as seven of us will find out in 24/7 prayer next week!

Who is this man Saul, at whose feet the witnesses lay their clothes? Who approved Stephen's death. Who began to destroy the church. Can it be the man of whom God was to say “This man is my

chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” How did he react to Stephen’s death? Did his Damascus Road experience come out of the blue. I think not. Stephen’s death was I believe the turning point in the thinking of Saul the Jew, who became Paul the mighty evangelist for Christ. He began to realise the mighty truth that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”. He understood that for the Son of God to die an accursed death was a blessing for us all. Thanks to Stephen’s witness.

So the person from whom you get opposition, who mocks you to your face, may not be unmoved by hearing the word of God from you. As Jesus said “One sows and another reaps”, along the line, words from God cumulate . I heard from a dear friend recently how she had been praying and witnessing to a close relative who had been a lifelong atheist, for 34 years. She suffered mockery. But he became a Christian two weeks before his death. But if you never experience such times you have to ask yourself – why?

The consequences of Stephen’s death were not just individual. God uses adversity for his people to spread his kingdom. We hear that “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.” Satan overreached himself in the death of Stephen and the faith actually spread.

This shows again what Wayne has been saying to us many times, it’s when we get out of the church that we will spread the word. Do we need to wait for trouble to do so? That we’ll get trouble when we do so is guaranteed, but remember again what Jesus said “in this world you will have trouble, but fear not, I have overcome the world”. I am challenged, and I suspect many of you are too.

Conclusion

Let me wrap up. We have seen that the early church was deemed worthy of persecution. They faced the trouble and suffering that Jesus prophesied for his followers, the suffering that the persecuted church around the world still undergoes today. What about us – and I include myself? There is a deep challenge here. Will we also be worthy of persecution? Will we burnish that mayoral chain that has become tarnished and dull, return to our first love? Will we face opposition to our faith, and challenge ourselves if we are not doing so? Out of love for Jesus? Will we stand up for God, as Stephen did? Will we challenge the lost for the sake of their salvation, even at a cost to ourselves? Will we seek God’s grace, the Holy Spirit’s power, his anointing at the 24/7 prayer?

And will we support those few who with us today who, in their home and workplace, are suffering opposition now? The wife whose husband mocks her faith, refuses to let her freely go to Christian gatherings? The teenager whose family sneers at her, and calls her bible basher? And those willing to witness in the workplace, at the cost of their reputation? These, and not the “holy huddle”, are in the front line of the advance of the kingdom. Let’s give them covering prayer, but let’s also go and join them!

Prayer and ministry for those seeking Stephen’s boldness in witness. For those suffering opposition now, in the home or workplace.