

About persecution

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[0:00] So it's actually verses 21 to 25 are a set passage for this evening about the American Civil War that's notable for its rather understated lyrics.

You can find it on YouTube if you want to look. It's the performance of it by Tom Jones. There's also one by Pete Seeger in The Weavers, which I prefer personally.

But I'm not going to attempt to sing it. Any of you who have heard me singing will know why. But I would like to quote a few verses. Just in case you're not familiar, of course, the American Civil War was when the southern states rose up in rebellion against the northern, against the federal government.

But, of course, it wasn't as simple as that. Civil wars never are. And the reference is that the government soldiers, the Union soldiers, just had a blue uniform.

And the Confederate soldiers, the rebels, if you like, had a grey uniform. And like all civil war, it splits families. And the song starts like this.

[1:32] Two brothers on their way. One more blue and one more grey. One more blue and one more grey. As they marched along their way, the fife and drum began to play, all on a beautiful morning.

As I say, it's very understated. But what a tragedy that is. And I won't go through the whole song, but let me just tell you the last verse of the song.

It finishes this way. Two girls waiting by the whale road track for their darlings to come back. One more blue and one more black.

Waiting by the whale road track for their sweethearts to come back. All on a beautiful morning. Civil wars always rip families apart.

They may not be the worst kind of wars in terms of numbers of casualties. But in terms of personal suffering, they are surely the worst kind of wars.

[2:41] And of course, that's just history. The English Civil War, the American Civil War, the French Revolution, they're all history. But they are still around today, aren't they?

You're only going to look at Syria to see the horror of civil war brought to a TV screen near you. In fact, I'm no historian, but here's a question for you.

Can you think of a single kingdom or nation in the whole of history whose origins are not rooted in conflict? I suppose it might be possible, but I think you'd struggle.

Well, most often a nation is forged in the fire of warfare, isn't it?

That's just the way the world is. Of course, people see things differently and one man's loyalty is another man's tyranny.

[3:50] And as I've said, the worst and most vicious war is often a civil war because it breaks families and communities apart and it breeds hatreds that take generations to fade.

The English civil war, the American civil war, the French revolution are all history and yet their impact lives on. As I said, in Syria we can see the horror of civil war in full HD colour now.

Oh, here's another question. What is the Brexit conflict really about? Something that engages the minds of pretty much everyone in Britain at the moment.

Is it about economics and immigration policy? Well, if it were really about those things, then surely it could be sorted with a bit of compromise and negotiation.

But it seems to be something deeper than that. And it makes odd allies, doesn't it?

[5:02] The Thatcherite matrons of the Tory shires have found common cause with middle-aged unemployed men in Hull. Political enemies for years, for generations.

But suddenly they've found common cause. And it's really a deeper question than those of immigration and economics, isn't it? Do we see our country as part of Europe, the heirs of a common culture over 2,000 years old?

Or do we see ourselves as the island nation, fiercely independent, the only European nation that comes with a moat? Does the English Channel unite us to Europe or keep us safe from it?

And of course in the past it's done both of those things. One can't in a sense say one of those things is choices is right or wrong. But there are choices that divide people deeply.

It's really a mythic question. What story of Great Britain do we subscribe to? It's a struggle for the soul and spirit of the nation.

[6:15] And so we become divided. And the whole social contract and constitutional settlement of the nation is rocked, isn't it?

We see that all around us. Families that have voted conservative or Labour for generations are now seeking new political loyalties. We become radicalised.

Nigel Farage complained about radicalised Remainers this week when somebody threw a milkshake at him. And in a sense he's right. And it's not degenerated into violence yet and we should pray that it does not.

But history shows us that when the political settlement is undermined violence is certainly possible. Last week they were throwing milkshakes. next week they could be throwing Molotov cocktails, petrol bombs.

At least one commentator has said that the division of the nation will take a generation to heal. I would suggest he's probably being overly optimistic. So what we have in our passage here is not the Brexit debate but the Israel debate.

[7:33] The fight for the spirit and soul of the nation of Israel. That is what is being described here. Notice that Jesus is absolutely explicit about this.

He tells them to go only to the lost sheep of Israel in verse 6. And he tells us that it's the authorities of Israel that will lead the attack against the apostles in verse 7. And he tells them that they're not going to run out of cities to go to in verse 23.

And so I think to understand this struggle, see what it's really about and particularly to understand verses 21 to 23, we actually need to look at two key Old Testament prophecies, two of the three that we read.

So let me just remind you again. First of all, Jesus talks here about the appearing of the Son of Man. Well, what does that mean? Well, it is direct reference to this prophecy in Daniel where Daniel says, before me was one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.

And his dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away. And his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Appearing of the Son of Man is a declaration of the rule of the king.

[9:00] And Jesus refers to the breaking of families, doesn't he? That seems to refer to the two, in verse 21, seems to refer to those two prophecies that I read, the one in Micah, which is, as I say, is actually quoted later on in Matthew, but also the one in Malachi.

This is the critical moment. I will send the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, on the hearts of their children to their fathers, or else, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

Jesus is warning them here of the or else to expect the curse. It's a struggle for the soul and spirit of the nation.

It's the critical time, the critical moment, the referendum, if you like, which changes everything, when the Son of Man comes. coming.

So what does Jesus mean when he talks of his coming? The appearing of the coming or the appearing of the Son of Man? Actually, I think one can't be entirely clear about this.

[10:28] Perhaps the immediate context might suggest that he's referring to when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, declaring himself to be the king, the king who comes in the name of the Son of David, who comes in the

name of David to claim the kingdom.

On the other hand, if we, from the Daniel prophecy, we might think he's talking about the final coming of the Son of Man, to rule with an iron rod. Or perhaps if we focused on the Malachi prophecy, the curse, we might think he's talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 40. I don't think we can be absolutely clear about which he's meant. In fact, it's probably, possibly, each and all of those. The coming of the Son of Man refers to his coming as the ruler, as the king who claims the throne of David.

And exactly what historical event that refers to, in a sense, hardly matters. It is his claiming of the throne of David that is the critical thing.

He comes to claim his rightful place. And that raises the question that the nation of Israel has to answer. Will the people acknowledge him as the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel?

[12:02] Or will Malachi's curse come into effect? Jesus seems to be suggesting that on the whole the latter is more likely, but still, some will receive him, we're told. The apostle's mission is not futile.

So this is the critical moment. For Israel, this is the crucial issue, the dividing line. Are they up for Israel 2.0? Or are they still signed up to the old flawed and bugged version?

Will they sign for the kingdom vision of Daniel and of Malachi and of Jesus himself? Or are they stuck in the old vision, a different loyalty?

If they accept the king, they will accept his messages, as Jesus goes on to explain. But conversely, if they reject the king, they will reject his messages, and a sword is brought to the world.

The quotation that the other passages I read from Micah 7 is a lament for the state of Israel. The breaking of families is an inevitable consequence of the hardness of men's hearts and rebellion in men's hearts.

[13:19] And it's tragic, of course. So before we look at the last two verses of our passage, the following verses, we ought to answer a question.

Most of us here are not Jews. Does this passage actually have anything to do with us? It's the history of a small Middle Eastern country 2,000 years ago.

Is that all it is? Can it have any relevance for us? But actually Daniel's prophecy makes it clear that it does, doesn't it? Because the Son of Man not only claims the throne of David, he claims the title of King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

He claims the authority over all the nations. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, of course, is the title of an emperor, one who claims the authority of all nations.

In a sense, the struggle there for Israel is just one battle in the global conflict throughout space and time. And Jesus says he's bringing a sword to the world, not just to Israel.

[14:43] So it's not just Israel that is called to a new loyalty, a new vision, but the citizens of the kingdoms of this world also. Of course, I don't want to go into this in detail, but let's be clear that Jesus is not proposing that his followers should take up the sword themselves.

As George Fox put it, you can't kill the devil with a gun or a sword. But the radicalisation, the radical nature of Christianity inevitably brings opposition.

And often it will bring persecution and judgment from the judges of this world. Inevitably, there are those with a different loyalty, a different vision. In the book of Revelation, again, we've been looking at in the mornings, it unveils the true alternative kingdom.

It's called Babylon. And it has some aspects there of Rome. In our passage we're looking at now, it's in a sense false Israel.

Israel that should be the people of God, but is not. Babylon is Rome, but it's not only Rome.

Babylon is every kingdom that sets itself up against the claims of the Son of Man.

[16:07] Every kingdom that sets itself in opposition to the one who God has sent, the true Son of David. Psalm 2 warns kings to kiss the Son lest they be destroyed in their way.

But most kings will not do that. So if Jesus is not actually telling people to engage, press the battle by physical warfare, what is he saying?

How is the battle to be pressed? How is the enemy to be engaged? And verses 24 and 25, which at first seem almost irrelevant, I think are actually the key.

the student is to be like the teacher. The servants are to be like the master. They must have the same message that the master set out.

Jesus had told them, hasn't he, to be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. We were looking at that last week or the week before, last week I think. But actually that shrewdness and even that innocence are limited in a sense.

[17:16] we are not to be so shrewd as to rewrite the gospel, not to be so shrewd as to spin the kingdom to appear other than it actually is, in order to avoid the conflict.

And if the charge is the subversion of old loyalties, even of the natural loyalties of the family, we are indeed guilty if we are like the master.

Of course Jesus claims our allegiance first. Verse 37. And again, let's be clear here. Jesus does not say that we should not love our families.

On the contrary, of course, the Ten Commandments insist that we should honour our parents. And Jesus in another place made a thing about that, saying you should honour and inspect your parents. And Paul said the same thing, of course.

But Jesus has the first claim on our love. Jesus has the first claim on our loyalties. If we are his disciples, if we are his followers, if we love him, then we must expect opposition.

[18:27] And sometimes violent opposition. Jesus is not telling us to shun our families, but rather warning that they may shun us.

Jesus quoted one verse from Micah, but as I read, the verse before it says, do not trust a neighbour, put no confidence in a friend, even with her who lies in your embrace, be careful of your words.

I can't remember exact words now, but the authorised version of that is even more striking.

That last phrase, it says, guard your mouth against her who lies in your arms. Something like that. If your partner is not a believer, watch your pillow talk.

It might be used against you. Watch out for the honey trap. Remember what happened to Samson. Remember what happened to Solomon.

[19:39] Our first loyalty must be to King Jesus and that must affect other loyalties, even other legitimate loyalties and friendships that we have. people will be to the world.

Okay, but doesn't that sound like a really bad idea then? What justification can Jesus possibly have for breaking up families and bringing conflict to the world?

Well, one thing you can be pretty sure about in any civil war, is that both sides will claim that they're freedom fighters. In Syria, where it's not just two sides, where there's three or four sides, each of them claims to be fighting for freedom.

In fact, the only real reason for engaging in civil war, the only sane reason really for engaging in civil war is a fight for freedom, isn't it?

there can be no other reason for taking up arms against your fellow citizens. But the trouble is that one man's freedom is another man's loyalty, as I said, is another man's tyranny, as I said.

[21:12] Think again about the Brexit debate. which freedom is it you want? Do you want the freedom to roam about Europe, roam the whole continent, go and live and set up shop and trade anywhere you want?

That's one freedom. Or do you want to be free from rules and regulations and laws made in Brussels? do you want to?

You could legitimately claim that both of those are freedoms, but they're incompatible. And in the end, you pay, as the saying goes, you pay your money and you take your choice.

choice. But the problem comes of course when people in the same community and in the same families make different choices. That's the way that conflict arises when one brother wears blue and the other brother wears grey.

So what freedom are you going to opt for? See, the kingdoms and philosophers of this world do offer freedom, freedom of a kind.

[22:33] But it's the freedom to be ourselves. Almost explicitly, that's the freedom they offer. Nowadays, might have been worded differently in the past, but nowadays it's pretty much explicit.

The freedom that is offered is the freedom to be ourselves. themselves. The Jews claimed allegiance to Abraham, but Jesus said if you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things that Abraham did.

So we can claim to be free, as the Jews did, as children of Abraham. But the trouble is, it's only the freedom to follow our own damaged souls and our own fickle hearts.

that's a freedom that the Bible tells us leads ultimately to death and only to death and destruction, to the destruction of meaning, to the pointlessness of everything, that everything that you hold dear will ultimately be destroyed and meaningless.

That is a kind of freedom, but it's not the freedom that King Jesus offers. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of righteousness and peace.

[24:00] Jesus offers us a different kind of freedom, the freedom to be what we could be and should be. But not everyone will want that.

But if you do want to be a disciple of Jesus, expect opposition. Because there will be others, even in your own community and family, who will make a different choice.

And it will be a struggle. It's described as a narrow and rocky path. Anyone who embarks on the process of being a disciple is warned to make sure that he's prepared for the cost.

And Jesus is spelling out here exactly what that cost is. And yet, it is worth the struggle. Because it is to be like Jesus is the freedom that leads not to death, but to life.

to become, as C.S. Lewis put it, a creature that if we were to meet him or her today, we would be tempted to worship ourselves.

[25:16] And yet, Jesus offers us that freedom to become fully alive. Not just half alive, but fully alive.

Here are some other words of Jesus from the end of the chapter. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.