

The Cost of Following Christ

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[0 : 00] Let us pray together.

Our Father, we give you thanks for all that you have given to us, for all that you have done for us, for your Son, our Saviour, for the gift of your Holy Spirit present here with us.

We pray that we might now hear your voice speaking to us. In the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen. I begin by thanking Andrew and Andrew for so kindly inviting us to be here this morning and to share with you, and for others who so courageously stand up for the work of the persecuted church, for you who pray for and support her.

So thank you all so very, very much. Will you turn with me, please, to 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verses 1 to 11.

The Apostle Paul is writing. He begins by making an affirmation. And the affirmation is a very simple one.

[1 : 26] He addresses God. And then he describes the nature of God in terms of love, in terms of compassion, in terms of the source of all comfort and consolation.

Our God, as we were hearing earlier, is a God rich in mercy, whose compassion is boundless, whose love is eternal and unending.

And so the Apostle brings to his readers attention the fact of this God, this God who is unique, whose nature is love, whose center is compassion, and who has an overwhelming concern for his people.

A God who understands, a God who sees, a God who enters into the very depths of their situations. A God who is never, never removed from them, no matter how great the difficulties.

We need to remember that affirmation and to hold it before us in times of great difficulties. God, the source of comfort and consolation.

[2 : 53] But secondly, he goes on to address recognition. The need to recognize the difficulties the people of God faces.

And this recognition occurs in the words that he uses to describe the difficulties. Words like troubles, hardships, suffering.

He goes on later to speak of distress. He speaks of pressure. And then he speaks of despair.

So these six elements culminating in despair describes the difficulties that the Christian community faces.

There is God who he speaks of in terms of comfort and consolation. That's the affirmation. And now there's the recognition that the people of God living in the real world is going to experience at times appalling difficulties.

[4 : 08] But there's a third area. And this area has to do with information. And this occurs particularly in verse 8. He writes, We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers.

He desires to bring them information about his condition and the condition of his fellow workers. They are ministering in Asia Minor.

Today it would be Southeast Turkey bordering on Syria. And he describes their conditions. And so he wants now to inform his readers of his conditions.

And he uses a rather interesting word to describe their condition. He uses the word not just hardships but pressure.

We were under great pressure. The word here in the Greek has the idea of a person lying on the ground on their back.

[5 : 23] A great weight is placed upon their chest. And this weight slowly crushes their ribcage.

So their breath literally begins to leave their body. And then their lung collapses. And they die.

So he is now describing a condition which he and his fellow co-workers are in. They are in a severe state.

So great is the pressure upon them. They feel that their very lives, their very breath is being squeezed out of them.

And so perhaps despair is the only way out. And with despair, death. And so he, as it were, yearns for death.

[6 : 27] Perhaps death is a merciful release for this appalling pressure. It's interesting, this word comfort and pressure.

In the Hebrew, if you read Isaiah 40, Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Say unto her. You all know those words from the Messiah, taken from Isaiah 40.

The word comfort means literally to cause to breathe out. Here in the Greek, the word pressure means to have the breath sucked out of you so that you die.

If there was anyone writing this, anyone else, we would say that person lacks faith. They need a hope in God. They're not being very Christian.

But here is the apostle describing his condition in terms of pressure, despair, and a desire for death.

[7 : 38] I believe that there are Christians today who face such pressure and such circumstances.

Let me give to you four areas of pressure. The first has to do with those Christians who are caught in the midst of war, where there is conflict and where there is violence and where their lot is unspeakable, where they live and where they die.

Two Sundays ago, I was speaking at St. Thomas' Cathedral in London. Now, very few will have heard of St. Thomas' Cathedral.

It is the cathedral of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Everyone, every single person in the congregation, including the Archbishop, was Iraqi, Barmi, and a refugee.

They came out of Iraq, and to a degree they represent the Church of Iraq. They had experienced Saddam Hussein's brutality.

[9 : 05] But intriguing enough that Saddam Hussein did not persecute the Christians. He allowed them to exist because they were the professionals, the doctors, the professors, the dentists, and they were necessary for the society.

But then after 1991's war with Iraq and the U.S. and the international community, there were sanctions, and gradually they were being broken as the rest of the society were.

And then came the Second Gulf War of 2003, and the forces that invaded Iraq, including Australian forces, sought not to protect the minorities.

And they went to the war. They received the threats, either convert to Islam or leave or die.

Many were kidnapped. Their women were raped. They faced bullets and bombs. They were ethnically cleansed from whole areas of Iraq.

[10 : 17] They would flee to Baghdad, then flee to the plains of Nineveh. And as violence pursued them, many took the option to leave the country.

And so they scattered across the world, homeless, penniless refugees, unwanted by their own society in Iraq, because they were deemed to be Christian and allied to the invaders.

But unwanted by the invaders, who saw no use for them. And when they fled to Muslim countries, they were unwanted, and the Western countries that invaded their country did not want them either.

And so they gave way to despair. Today, how many are they?

In 2003, there were about one and a half million before the war. Today, about 300,000, and declining rapidly.

[11 : 26] A broken community. A community. A community that at one point, one point lost all hope, and they saw only a way out in terms of death.

Interesting enough, the one country that received them was Syria. President Assad. Young Assad. And he took in more than 450,000 Christians.

A country already poor, and a Muslim country. He took the decision that they would look after the Christians. And Syria was the only country in the Middle East that gave full freedoms and equalities to the Christian community.

And now, the Christians of Syria believe that they are another Iraq.

As the international community gather as vultures, supporting the terrorists that are now wreaking havoc upon their communities, the 60,000 Christians of whom have gone.

[12 : 54] They have seen their churches destroyed, their institutions destroyed, their homes destroyed. The 60,000 Christians around whom live in the villages also are having to flee.

The stability and safety of Aleppo is now under attack as the suicide bombers deploy themselves into the Christian areas.

In one part of Syria recently, 12,000 Christians were held hostage. No food, no water was allowed in.

The international community is silent to their plight. The media do not report their situation and their conditions.

And the Christian communities international is oblivious to their existence. The Archbishop at St. Thomas' Cathedral in welcoming me had just returned from Damascus.

[14 : 03] And he gave a story of a member of their church there in Syria, of a father who had handed over his 16-year-old daughter to the people traffickers as the price for the safety of the family.

What of that young Christian girl today? How do Christians survive? Many have lost their homes. If they work for the government in any capacity, they are kidnapped and killed. They are now displaced within Syria.

And increasingly, they are fleeing. To escape, you pay a people trafficker generally occurred 10,000 US dollars.

So a family of five is 50,000 US dollars. You make your way to Turkey, the back of a lorry, and then you are dumped somewhere where you then have to walk and then end up in a prison, for example, in Greece.

[15 : 23] Separated from kith and kin, young girls are being sold into prostitution. That is our Christian community today in Syria.

What do they number? 2.3 million. As the West supports Saudi Arabia and Qatar, so the Christians of Syria pay for it with their lives.

Pressure. Or, what of Nigeria? I am Dean Theologian of the Church of Nigeria, Canon Theologian of Kaduna.

That is one of our Middle Belt states in Nigeria. Bishop Timothy, at a recent Bishop's Conference in Nigeria, spoke to the bishops with the following words.

I am meant to be a messenger of that tidings, of hope, but I am here today as a messenger of despair and death.

[16 : 43] 25 of my churches, he said, have just been destroyed. Two of my congregations have just been slaughtered. Every Christian wiped out.

The Bishop of Maiduguri then said, 100 bombs have just gone off in my diocese. There are no Christians left in Maiduguri, only the Bishop and his clergy.

We in the Barnabas Fund, for example, we maintain the whole diocese because all Christians have fled and you maintain the structure, so we underwrite the clergy salaries and to keep the bishop in place.

The 1st of October, a university town in Middle Belt, Nigeria, 48 Christian students were rounded up by the Muslim extremists, Boko Haram, and told, well, deny Christ.

They refused. Every one of them were slaughtered. Several months ago, I was in Washington with Archbishop Ben Quashie.

[18 : 02] He is Archbishop of Plateau Se, state of an Anglican diocesan province. We were having breakfast with the chairman of the International Religious Commission of the State Department.

And the chairman asked him a question. He said, Your Grace, how many of your Christians have died in recent times? He answered, More than 10,000.

This last week, rightly, you have remembered the several hundred that was killed in Bali. And you have grieved.

and you have worked. Anne, in her prayers, spoke of the lack of recognition of our suffering brethren.

Did you know that more than 10,000 Christians have died in Plateau State, that part of Middle Belt, Nigeria?

[19 : 09] does it matter? Did you know that 48 were slaughtered on the 1st of October? Did you know of the hundreds, now thousands, of Christians who are being killed in Syria?

Did you know of the many, many thousands that have died in Iraq? I can keep going. And they die without international recognition.

They die without the acknowledgement even of their brother Christian, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we continue to live our lives as if they do not exist.

that pressure can lead to a desire for death because it is born out of despair.

But there is a second kind of pressure. Even as the terrorist organizations increase, as they create mayhem within society so that old societies collapsed and the Christians are caught in the middle, so there comes another kind of pressure.

[20 : 35] The pressure of ideology, of religious extremism, of Islamic law, of Egypt for example.

The Arab Spring has turned into a Christian autumn leading into a Christian winter. the hopes of last year, of a new age and a new day of human rights and religious liberty, have given way to pessimism and despair.

My great friend, the General Secretary of the Egyptian Bible Society, Ramesh Atala, has written of a revolution betrayed.

That revolution did not produce a liberal democratic society. It produced an Islamist government led by President Morsi, shaped by both Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

It is the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist movements that now reign over Egypt. And the 9-10 million Christians, Cops, Evangelicals and others now exist at the behest of an Islamist government that increases pressure upon them, destroy their properties, attack their Christian communities, kidnap and rape their women, and ridicule their faith.

[22 : 16] That ideology is spreading. and whereas a single film on YouTube can create mayhem in the world and bring about responses of apologies from Western leaders, the destruction, the oppression, the subjugation and marginalization of a whole Christian community produces not a response.

several months ago on Egyptian television there occurred a single feature which has stayed with me.

It's a convert from Islam to Christianity. He is seen to be bowing down and a knife is slowly applied to his throat.

I put myself through the task of deliberately watching this event and slowly he is beheaded and then his head is lifted high and that was shown on mainstream Egyptian television and it did not warrant an outcry from the international community why he was a convert.

So what? the pressure of ideology but thirdly there is the pressure born out of discrimination and marginalization.

[23 : 57] I am also canon of Peshawar St. John's Peshawar in the northwest frontier of Pakistan. Eighty percent of our Christian community in the northwest frontier do one of two jobs.

They either sweep the streets or clean the sewers. What do they face now with the rising Talibanization of the frontier?

The war that has moved from Afghanistan into the frontier itself in Swat and in other areas with the Christian community increasingly coming under attack.

Poverty is endemic. The recent disasters of earthquakes and floods have affected them severely.

The Muslim aid agencies recognized even by the Muslim media in Pakistan do not acknowledge their existence and seek to bring help and aid.

And the international Christian organizations do not involve themselves either. And they find themselves left alone, bereft.

[25 : 20] Five million Christians of Pakistan. This issue of poverty and marginalization is increasing at a rapid scale.

For as religious extremism increases, as societies are being destabilized, so the poorest of the poor suffer. And not just in Islamic context.

You only have to look at Sri Lanka where the Barnabas Fund is involved. You had the Great Tsunami. You had a civil war. Then you had the floods.

You go to some parts now of Sri Lanka where all churches have been destroyed, not directly because of government policy, because they are Christians, but the aftermath of that war.

Christians whose homes have been destroyed. Their institutions do not exist. And they live in appalling poverty, neglected by government.

[26 : 26] Why? Because they are Christian. by the international community. Why bother? But there is a fourth pressure. And this pressure is placed upon individuals.

Individuals who are converts from Islam. I've been reading that in January Australian forces will leave Afghanistan.

by 2014 ISAF later will leave. Have you given any thought to the converts?

There are 1,200 converts or so. Karzai has ruled they should die. So have the Taliban. So what will happen to them?

Some have fled to Pakistan and to Delhi and we in the Barnabas Fund are looking after them. in Delhi there are 12 of them led by Pastor Obeid.

[27 : 29] The Taliban have now put a price on his head. His picture is on YouTube including his address. So he needs to escape.

12 of them. Last year we went to New Zealand. The Attorney General was sympathetic. Then came the letter from the Deputy Minister of Immigration.

New Zealand do not accept refugees based on religion. But he added the following. And anyway it's their own fault. They should never have converted to Christianity.

So we came to Australia and Australia also have rejected them. Our brothers and sisters, 12 of them, facing potential death in Delhi.

If they're sent back almost certain death, if they continue to be there, Taliban will kill them. Neither New Zealand nor Australia will accept them.

[28 : 38] Converts, and I'm a convert from Islam, like me, increasingly are unwanted. We are regarded as a scandal. International governments, such as the US and UK, I would argue including your own, don't particularly like us, because we are regarded as troublemakers.

It is best that we never convert it, because we simply create disharmony between the religions. distress, pressure, but there is prayer.

For here Paul ends this passage by saying, because you prayed, things changed. Hope entered into the situation that because the people of God exhorted God to intervene, something happened. Yes, we have this affirmation. Yes, this recognition. Yes, Paul gives information, but he concludes with what can be done.

It is not a hopeless situation, for God is involved, and if his people becomes involved on behalf of their suffering brothers and sisters, there is the possibility of hope.

[30 : 07] hope. He writes gloriously in chapter 4 of this hope. He says this, for we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, but not destroyed.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our bodies.

Brothers and sisters, think not just of the death of our suffering brothers and sisters, but the life that comes from it. for the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, and here you and I enter into their life even as we experience their death, a life that comes to us of Christ, his presence, his power, who he is, what our faith is all about.

What does it mean to follow Christ today in the ease of our materialistic society, where we complain at the least thing, where we are never tested nor tried, where the pressure has to do with well-being?

[31 : 48] What does it mean to follow Christ? We come to the table now. We take of the bread, and we take of the wine.

The bread that we take, is it not the body of Christ? The cup that we take, is it not the blood of Christ? Where is Christ? The head is in glory.

Where is his body? His body is here on earth. He was broken 2,000 years ago, yet he continues to be broken today.

Why? Because his body continues to be broken. His blood continues to be shed as he lives through his people.

And as you and I enter into this communion feast, we do so with a memory, not just of him who lived, who loved, and who died for us, and who rose again and will come again, but we remember that we are one body.

[32 : 57] And if part of that body suffers, the whole body suffers. We in the Barnabas Fund will speak and continue to speak of that body of Christ of which we are a part.

And I exhort you to feel. I do not exhort you for us to give, but to feel. Even as you take these emblems, so you will feel in your hearts an overwhelming love for Jesus, who died for you. So feel for your brothers and sisters, who are represented in this. And if you feel, then remember them and pray for them.

And then if God enables you, you can then assist them by arguing their case and seeking to alleviate their need.

That is the work of the Barnabas Fund. Not to send workers, but to seek for prayers and humanitarian assistance to sustain and to strengthen the body of Christ in suffering context.

[34 : 17] all the prophetic