

9 August 2020
Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

At our 10am service today our guest speaker will be Mike Burrows, from the organisation Open Doors, serving the persecuted church around the world. As I thought about persecuted Christians I was reminded of a song I learnt in my youth: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus". The song originates out of one man's experience of persecution. The lyrics are based on the last words of a 19th century Indian man from Assam, who along with his family decided to follow Jesus Christ through the efforts of a Welsh missionary. When the village chief demanded that he renounce his new faith, the convert declared, "I have decided to follow Jesus." In response to threats to his family, the man continued, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow." Then his wife was killed; and he himself was executed while singing, "The cross before me, the world behind me." This display of resolute faith is reported to have led to the eventual conversion of the chief and others in the village.¹

Down through the ages, people have been persecuted for the faith they hold. Joseph was persecuted by his own brothers because he shared with them what God had shown him, something that challenged their understanding of the ways of God and of man.

Saint Paul discovered how much it cost to resolutely declare that *Jesus* is Lord in a culture built around the lordship of someone else. A couple of weeks ago, our evening prayer readings took us into 2 Corinthians 6 where Paul set out a litany of what he had endured for the sake of the gospel: beatings, imprisonment, riots, hunger, and so on.

And of course, persecution occurs today. It takes many forms.²

- For example, persecution can occur within families. A new Christian in Vietnam was recently attacked by his family because he would not deny Jesus. When he

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Have_Decided_to_Follow_Jesus

² The information that follows is drawn from <https://www.opendoors.org.nz/persecuted-christians/prayer-news/>

refused to return to his former animist religion, his cousins beat him with branches and stones until he fell unconscious. Severely injured, he spent several days in hospital. When he returned to his farm, he discovered that the land had been confiscated by his relatives who ordered him to leave.

- Persecution can be done by a state seeking to covertly enforce a particular religion. Seven new Christians in the southwest of Iran were recently found guilty of trumped-up charges of “propaganda against the state”. Christian materials they owned were used as evidence against them, and they were condemned to prison. This is despite the fact that the authorities publically assert that “no-one is put in prison in Iran simply because of their beliefs.”
- Persecution can take the form of prohibition of religious gatherings and of evangelism.
- Persecution can take the form of legislation against wearing or displaying Christian symbols, or engaging in public prayer.

And it can be deeply troubling and frightening to think about such things. Some Christians face these kinds of threats every day: for us in New Zealand the fear is more likely about whether we might be heading away from the considerable freedom we currently enjoy.

And in the midst of these kinds of fears, we need to hear the strong words of Jesus: “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid” [Matthew 15:27]

I started by relating the story of the Assamese man who as he was executed was singing, “The cross before me, the world behind me.” For him the world lay behind, left behind in death. What lay before him was expressed in the cross, the assurance in Christian faith that death would not mean the end.

I have often thought that the words we sing might be the wrong way round. As we sing “The world behind me, the cross before me”, I get the feeling that a lot of Christians are drawn towards a sort of world-denying, escapist perspective. There is the danger that we see the things of this world as not mattering, as being of no

consequence. There is a kernel of truth there; but the problem is that for some this leads to disengagement, to apathy and inaction.

We Christians in New Zealand can be just a bit too comfortable, because professing Jesus is relatively easy – or at least has limited consequences. The experience of the worldwide persecuted Church however holds up a mirror to our comfort and complacency. The persecuted Church prays for *us!*

Paul says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”. [Romans 10:9]

Declaring “Jesus is Lord” is what people did then, and do now, when getting baptised. What we have perhaps lost along the way, but need to recover, is the significance of that confession. In Paul’s world, ‘Lord’ was a title for Caesar. Saying Jesus was Lord meant, ultimately, that Caesar wasn’t. In those days, this couldn’t be just a lip-service thing. The baptismal confession, “Jesus is Lord”, could mean risking one’s life. I think we need to recover the vital significance of that statement. To declare “Jesus is Lord” in our day needs to mean that nothing and no-one else now has our allegiance. *Nothing* and *no-one else* has our allegiance. The persecuted Church reminds us of the significance of that.

What do we understand Paul to mean by declaring with your mouth and believing in your heart?³

This could be understood in a ‘cheap grace’ kind of way, as if, like Harry Potter, saying certain magic words will save us, if we say them the right way with the proper knowledge. But this approach mistakenly equates believing that God raised Jesus from the dead with, say, believing in the existence of the planet Neptune – something we may have never seen but accept as true; something that has little if any impact on how we actually live.

The problem is that we’ve come to see “believing” as a matter of the mind. We’ve come to see “believing” as something of the nature of a noun, something about a

³ The following quotes freely from Crouch

state of being. Instead, true believing is more of the nature of a verb – believing involves action.

Scripture makes clear in many places that believing in one's heart is not a matter of simply thinking something is true. As American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce said, a belief is something on which we are willing to act.

Do you believe this chair exists? Do you believe it will hold you? How could you prove that you believe it exists and can hold you?
By sitting in it, of course.⁴

Changing our allegiance to Jesus Christ is rather like getting out of the chair that represents placing my trust in “me” (or in anything else), and sitting in the chair that is Jesus Christ. To receive eternal life, you must transfer your trust from yourself to Christ.

And of course, we mustn't straddle two chairs – that way is dangerous, and leads to a fall. We must transfer ourselves completely to trust in Jesus.

Charles Peirce said, a belief is something on which we are willing to act. In Paul's time, to declare “Jesus is Lord” was to risk one's life. To take that risky action of saying those words required a genuine belief that Jesus is in fact Lord of all, and that the potential consequences were therefore worth it.

Similarly, if we believe in our heart that Jesus was raised from the dead, then we *act* as if death does not have the last say on life, as if God is indeed the God of life, as if no matter how rough the road, God will hear when we cry out. That is the faith exhibited by the persecuted Church.

As we see Jesus coming towards us, walking on the water – an impossible feat – we are reminded that we are dealing with the one Lord, God who has total command over all that he made.

⁴ Illustration from Evangelism Explosion: http://www.abcmemphis.org/page/evangelism_explosion_outline

It is belief of the kind that leads to action that led to Peter venturing out of the boat and onto the water. However, the key point in the story comes not as Peter gets out of the boat, but as he starts to sink *when he saw the strong wind and waves*. In other words, he took his eyes off Jesus. His trust failed. Here he is, in a dangerous situation, clambering out of the Jesus chair and wobbling as he straddles the Jesus chair and his own chair, as his weight shifts back and forth between the two. And Jesus reaches out and catches him, and gently rebukes him for his lack of faith.

As far as we know, walking on water in the literal sense wasn't something the early Christians expected to do by themselves.⁵ Paul, facing another shipwreck, apparently never imagined that getting out of the boat and strolling off to the shore was a viable option. So that's not the point for us here.

The point for us is about our ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ, our obedience to him to whatever he is calling us to, and placing our wholehearted, active, trust in him.

There are many times when Jesus asks us to do what seems to us impossible. How can we even begin to do the task he's called us to do? How can we imagine leaving the life we've known to follow him into a new calling? How can we even think of doing without that sinful habit we're asked to give up? How can we really suppose that we might be able to develop a serious habit of prayer when we're so frantic and disorganised?

We have a choice. We could, like Peter, choose to look at the waves being whipped up by the wind, and conclude that it has indeed become impossible. Or we can keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, and our ears open for his encouragement and correction. And our wills and hearts must be ready to do what he says, even if it seems crazy at the time.

Paul said, "if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."⁶ Belief in our hearts does not

⁵ Following paragraphs make free use of Wright, *Paul*.

⁶ This paragraph from Crouch, with adaptation.

make us people who say the right words. It makes us people like Abraham and Sarah, Joseph's ancestors, who hope against hope and do not weaken or waver in the face of life's greatest challenges. It makes us people who believe and trust in God in the core of our being. And when God hears our cries and reaches out to us, we seek to make that trust alive and real in the choices we make every day.

The old song goes "The world behind me, the cross before me." As I said earlier I think there is merit in thinking too of the words going the other way around: "the cross behind me, the *world* before me." In other words, in the light of the faith in which the dying and rising of Jesus was the pinnacle event, and standing strong in the promises of that faith, we turn our face to the world to live and work in it to advance God's purposes. Jesus calls his Church to *be* Church, to be salt and light in the world, and that does not mean disengagement and withdrawal. It means action! "The cross behind me, the world before me." Yes, Jesus left all behind and went to the cross. But Jesus went to the cross *precisely for* the sake of the world.

"The cross behind me, the world before me." The call to us is the same. We are called to be a distinctive people, not to be cosy and comfortable, but ready to risk all out of allegiance to Jesus Christ. We are called to be a distinctive people so that the world will come to the fullness of the knowledge of Christ – that every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Sources:

- Matt Skinner, "That Sinking Feeling", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4949>
- Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans. Part 2, Chapters 9-16*, pp. 28-33
- Frank L Crouch, "Commentary on Romans 10:5-15", https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3373
- Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-15*, pp.189-191