

The world is rapidly becoming a more dangerous place. We must love and look after one another. At this greatest Mass of the church's year – Christ's Mass – we should remember in our prayers our Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering persecution in many lands. In Pakistan, individual Christians and their families are attacked every day. Churches are routinely burned down. Recently, a Christian lorry driver in that country stopped at a roadside stall for a cup of tea. He made the mistake of wearing a Cross. The stall-holder was upset by this. So he called his friends and together they stoned the lorry driver to death. Again a Christian was making his way from Saudi Arabia to Syria, when he was impeded by three men who noticed a tattoo of the Cross on the man's wrist. So they cut his hand off.

These are not isolated incidents. In Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria and dozens of other locations, Christians are being murdered and dispossessed. It rarely gets into the papers. And the aggressively secular BBC doesn't report it either. Both the Arab TV channel *Al Jazeera* and the Jewish *Jerusalem Post* feature the persecution of Christians more prominently than our mass media. If you want to see the extent of this persecution, do a Google search for *The Barnabas Fund*, a charity which reports on these atrocities and also supports distressed Christians worldwide.

What do our Bishops and Archbishops say about these worldwide outrages? Next to nothing. Why not? They explain that they are deeply committed to interfaith discussions with moderate Muslims and they do not wish to jeopardise these talks by too much drawing attention to the widespread persecution that is going on. But it's not the moderate Muslims who are doing the persecuting: it is the barbarism of the Islamofascists in their worldwide *jihad*. A barbarism is a form of hell on earth. And remember that the demons in hell are not merely the enemies of God: every form of hell is chaos and a house of lies; every demon is at war not just with God but with every other demon. So the same *jihadists* who suicide bomb Christians and burn down churches also blow up other Muslims and burn down their mosques.

It's hard to imagine a worse persecution, but there is one: and it is worse because it is home-grown. Throughout Europe Christians are under attack from militant atheists and secularists highly placed in governments and political institutions. It is illegal now in Britain to teach in state schools that Christianity is true. The 2000 year old institution of Christian marriage is now officially regarded as no more significant than any of the other fashionable arrangements. So that David Willetts said two days before Christmas that marriage will become the province only of the middle classes if the present trend continues.

Churches have always been regarded as charities. Not any longer. Churches will soon have to apply for charitable status by proving that what they do is for public benefit. Whereas, the

Christian religion was always regarded in this country as a good thing in itself. Now the ancient office of churchwarden is turned into that of a Trustee and churches have to register to achieve charitable status! Where do the secularists think the very word *charity* came from? Throughout public policy there is a deliberate and sustained attempt to marginalise the Christian faith. Church schools have their admissions policies scrutinised by government officials who haven't a religious brain in their heads. These secularists in high places hate us and they have declared that they wish to see Christianity removed from the public realm. They wish to see the faith relegated to the purely private practice of individual eccentrics. In this way the faith which created European civilisation will have no more say in public life. That is how serious it is. England is no longer a Christian country.

Every day we receive news of fresh persecutions. This week, for instance, a peripatetic teacher, Olive Jones, was sacked from her post for offering to pray for one of her pupils who was sick. It's not as if Olive held the girl down and conducted a violent exorcism: she merely offered to pray and when her offer was turned down, she withdrew. Still she was reported to the commissars for schools and sacked.

Let me remind you that a decade ago Osama bin Laden said there would be no need for a military campaign in order to win Europe for Islam. He taunted us: *You lack the stomach for a fight*. Given the aggressiveness of our own powerful secularists, the pathetic lie-down-and-die attitude of the church leaders, the demographic revolution which is upon us through mass immigration and relative birth rates, Europe will no longer be a Christian continent within a generation.

You must wonder why I am spoiling your Christmas by telling you of persecutions. Surely the Rector could save his doom-laden remarks for a suitable Sunday in Lent? I am telling you of these persecutions and the bleak future which overhangs us because they are of the essence of what Christianity is about. Let me take you back to the Sermon on the Mount. There, Our Lord said, *Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad...for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you*. This was no casual remark. He meant to warn us and to encourage us.

The Christian Father Tertullian told us explicitly, *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*. This is because at the centre of our faith is the fact of life out of death. So when we are under persecution we should not grumble or shrink or ask *What's the use?* and, like the bishops, keep our heads down. We should redouble our enthusiasm for the faith. We should stand up and stand out and proclaim Christ.

Let us get right to the middle of this matter of persecution. Why do our enemies hate us? They hate Christianity because it tells the truth. As usual Eliot puts this supremely:

*Why should men love the church? Why should they love her laws? She tells them of Life and Death and of all that they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard and hard where they like to be soft. She tells them of Evil and Sin and other unpleasant facts. They constantly try to escape from the darkness outside and within by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.*

Christmas is not an escape. It is not the one day in the year when we are permitted to ignore the truth. Everything we do this day – not just in church – but, from the first glass of Champagne to the very last mince pie, is a celebration of the truth. We have it in the Christmas Gospel: *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.* We have it in the words of Our Lord himself: *I am the way, and the truth...*

This truth is that we are flawed creatures, we are sinners. We cannot save ourselves. We are not progressing, getting better all the time. Evil and wickedness have not been done away with just because we have flush toilets, central heating, Ipods and portable phones. Nevertheless, we are saved. We are redeemed because God in Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, committed the unspeakable act of taking our flesh upon him and suffering death upon the Cross that we might live. This is the truth which our enemies will not accept – because above all it offends their pride, their self-esteem, their fancying themselves as emancipated and progressed; their moral relativism, their diversity, their commissarial policies of equalisation in which, of course, all the equalising is equalising down.

On Christmas Day truth became embodied, incarnate. This is why we rejoice. Because through what God does in Christ we are victorious. We have the everlasting hope:

**The holly bears a berry  
As red as any blood  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ  
For to do poor sinners good**