

“The Witnesses”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 21 September 2008 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Revelation 11:1-14
<u>Reading</u>	Revelation 10:9 - 11:14
<u>Songs</u>	from Mission Praise: 465, 387, 32, 168, 151 From The Source: 265, 246
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

Would you be prepared to die for your faith?

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me.
.....whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:35-35)

What Jesus predicted for his followers was a life of adversity
where we could well be called upon to choose between our allegiance to him
and life itself.

Yet we in England today have become accustomed to an easy-going Christianity,
where neither our luxurious Western lifestyle,
nor our physical safety
is threatened by our belief.

This of course is not the case in many countries across the world.

In Bethlehem, Christians are being steadily driven out.
They number now only 15% of the population,
compared with 60% in 1990.
There have been many examples of intimidation,
beatings,
land theft,
torture,
kidnap,
sexual harassment
and extortion.
Some Muslims who have converted to Christianity have been murdered.

In Orissa in north-east India,

some 4028 houses,
96 churches
and 14 other Christian institutions
have been destroyed by Hindu militants since August 24th this year.

Vietnam continues to repress independent churches
and 22 Christians were arrested between July and August this year.

In Karnataka, also in India but on the Western coast,
Hindu militants have attacked 15 Catholic and Pentecostal churches
and a monastery,
this year.

In Iran, the church is exploding,
but it is coming at a price.
The people are arrested,
harassed,
persecuted
and in some cases beaten severely.
It is not an easy pathway.

International Christian Concern lists no less than thirty-four countries
where known religious persecution against Christians continues today.

This, of course, has been the story of the church since its inception.
Jesus said it would be
and so it has been.

Saul of Tarsus persecuted the church almost before it had been formed.
Rome tried to eliminate Christians,
but having failed to do so,
adopted Christianity as the national religion across the entire Roman empire,
thus preserving the church
and spreading it across wide areas of the globe.

In Reformation times both Catholics and Protestants,
to our everlasting shame,
persecuted each other,
yet the church survived.

In the communist era,
both China and the Soviets attempted to annihilate the church,
but failed.

Today, in the West, particularly in Britain,
we are subjected not to persecution as such,
but as we saw in the column I read earlier (1)
to a kind of intellectual ridicule
which brands us either as stupid or ignorant
and attempts to deride faith
and immunise the public mind
against acceptance of the Christian message.

As we look back across the centuries
we see a suffering church
yet a triumphant church
which against all odds
and against determined opposition from the world in all its forms
has survived.
Today the gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ is still preached across the world
even in those countries where to become a Christian is to invite suffering
antagonism
and rejection
by those whom you love most dearly.

Such is the power of the message.

Amazingly,
the church seems to thrive on persecution.
Even today, the church is growing in the most unfriendly countries,
whereas in tolerant countries like our own the Christian church is in decline.
Our once proud Christian country is fast becoming a cauldron of apathetic Christianity,
aggressive atheism,
and fundamental Islam,
yet the Gospel is still preached.

The challenges to Christians today are manifold,
but two or three will suffice for tonight.
Firstly, how to resist despair and apathy.
Secondly, how to maintain our faith without capitulating to irrationality
and retiring into a ghetto
where we practice our Christianity in a sanitized environment
and spend our time in self-indulgent churchianity.
Thirdly, how to communicate the Gospel of Christ
to a world that is neither watching nor listening.

With that in mind,
let us turn to our Bibles
and the strangeness of what John sees in visions on the Isle Patmos
and records for us in the Book of Revelation.

Last week, at the end of chapter 10,
we left John eating the little scroll
which he had taken from the hand of the mighty angel
who stood on the land and the sea.

As he ate the scroll,
he found, as he had been told,
that it would be sweet to taste but sour in his stomach.

And having eaten it,
he was told that he must prophecy to many peoples,
nations,
languages
and kings.

(Revelation 10:9-11)

Next in the beginning of chapter 11,
John is told to measure the temple of God and its altar
and to count the worshippers there.
He is particularly told *not* to measure the outer temple court,
because it has been given over to the Gentiles.
The gentiles, we are told,
will trample on the holy city for 42 months.

Now I have to remind you that all of this is symbolic language.
Many have tried to read real events into these chapters and failed,
though others maintain their claims.
Nevertheless, we shall treat the whole portion as symbolic.

So God is interested in the temple of God,
the altar where sacrifice is made
and the number of worshippers.
This is the church of God through the ages.
His people are often referred to in the Bible as the temple of God;
the place where he dwells among his people.
They are very precious to him,
but the altar emphasises the sacrificial nature of service to God.

The Gentiles are the nations -
the world of men opposed to God.
They will trample on the people of God for 42 months.
The world hates the people of God
and will abuse them
and seek to subdue them for a period of time controlled precisely by God.
Not necessarily and unlikely to be actually 42 months,
but a limited time under God's control known only to him.

Next appear two witnesses, who prophecy for 1260 days.
They are dressed in sackcloth.
If anyone tries to harm them,
fire comes out of their mouth and devours their enemies.
They are given extraordinary powers.

When the witnesses have finished their testimony,
the Beast will come out of the abyss and kill them
and they will lie on the street unburied,
and the whole world will rejoice at their demise.

But the rejoicing is short-lived, for after 3½ days God breathes new life into them
and they ascend into heaven while their enemies look on in dread.
Then God punishes the world
and a tenth of the people perish.
And the rest, filled with dread,
give glory to God acknowledging at last that he is God.

So what does all this mean?

I think there is a connection between these things which we see here.

I think that the little scroll that John has to eat
is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In essence, the Gospel is simple.

Even a child can comprehend that Jesus died in his place.

Hence it is a little scroll.

Yet it has to be said that the gospel is so profound
that the greatest of minds can plumb its depths
and still find more.

When you discover the Gospel and take it in
it is the sweetest thing on earth.

It sets you free from sin
and delivers you from the tyranny of self to live an upright life.

It introduces you to a close relationship with God.

Through it God accepts you as his son or daughter
and promises you an eternity with him,
where there will be no more suffering
and where every tear shall be wiped from your eye.

There can be no sweeter reward than this.

But as we have already seen,

to follow Christ is to sacrifice and suffer.

The modern church, at least in Britain
conveniently forgets this.

I was interested to see a recent interview in Christianity magazine, (2)
where Laurence Singlehurst is saying that modern so-called worship songs
have become overwhelmingly inward looking
concentrating on the 'Me & Jesus' theme.

There need to be more outward-looking songs, (he says)
encouraging believers to look beyond their personal relationship with Jesus,
wonderful though that is,
to their personal responsibility to take the message outside the church
and get their hands dirty.

I think he's right,
but I would go further.

Christians need to accept that Christianity is a suffering pathway.

The outworking of the Gospel in an antagonistic world is distressing.

It hurts.

It challenges our values,
and our self-centredness.

It colours everything we do.

And has a massive impact

on unbelievers who dare to contemplate the implications of the message.

The Gospel is indeed sweet to the taste,
but sour to the stomach.

And it this message that John is to prophesy to the nations.

Next we see that God is interested in his people.

The fact that he tells John to measure the sanctuary
suggests that he values the church.

He knows the extent of his church
and he numbers every one who is a part of it.

But in the same verses we find that the gentiles,
the nations,
the world opposed to God,
will trample on his people for a limited time -
symbolically 42 months.

So for this fixed period,
known and controlled by God
there will be suffering in this world.

But it is not a fixed state.

John’s readers need to know that their suffering and persecution is not endless.
God has put a time limit on it.

The two witnesses represent the people of God who proclaim his message.

We are told they are the two olive trees and the two lamp-stands.

Now we know from chapter 1 that the lamp-stands are churches.

We also know from other Scriptures
that the olive trees represent the spirit of God who feeds the churches.

Some think that these two represent the two faithful churches from the beginning of the book,

but I think there is a wider meaning here.

Throughout Scripture God requires two witnesses to establish the truth

and here symbolically the two witnesses provide all that is necessary
to witness to an antagonistic world.

They witness for 1260 days.

1260 days is 42 months based on a 30 day month
and is the same time period during which the people of God are trampled on by
the nations.

So we see that the Gospel is preached during the period of hostility.

They preach in sackcloth, the clothing of mourners,
for their message is sombre.

It is a message of judgement
if the world will not repent.

We may marvel at the powers that the witnesses are given

for we have never seen such powers demonstrated in our day,
but most of the things mentioned here were exhibited by the prophets of old at
different times and suggest that God uses these powers to preserve the church
while it witnesses for God during the allotted time.

At the end of that time,

when the work of the church is complete,
the Beast comes up, makes war on them, defeats them

and they die.

The Beast is undoubtedly Satan, the enemy of God
and hence the enemy of God's people.
Throughout the ages, he will use all his power to silence the word of God
and the witness of his people,
but Revelation teaches that his power is always limited by God.

All this suggests that when the church's work on earth is done,
Satan will appear to have won the victory and the world will rejoice,
but God will redeem his church
and take his people to their heavenly home.
And God will judge the people of the world for their opposition to his church.

This may be chronological,
but I think this has also been the continuous situation throughout the history of
the church,
for when Christian martyrs die for Christ,
Satan appears to have won the victory,
but the martyrs awake to find themselves with the Lord
for whom they gave their life.

Christianity does not promise virgins to martyrs to satisfy earthly lusts,
but an eternity with Christ.
And we need to know that Satan will never win.

Revelation is a strange book to modern Western eyes,
but at heart it is a book of hope,
for what we see is that the Lamb of God has won the victory
and that the redeemed will enjoy everlasting life.
But it also tells us that the pathway is a suffering pathway,
but not for long.

We will never be called to suffer more than we can bear
and we need to know that the enemies of our faith
will not in the end overthrow what God has planned for his people.

Therefore we should not despair.

God is in control and he is more powerful
than those who oppose the truth and us.

Now is not the time to retire behind closed doors for fear of those who would harm us.
Now is the time to spread the word of God in any way we can.
We have a message of salvation for the world.
Let us find imaginative ways to spread that word
to any who can be persuaded to listen.

This is the mission of the church.
So let's go out and do it until Jesus comes.

Amen

Paul Rydon –
21 September 2008

References:

- (1) Jamie Whyte, ‘I don’t believe that believers really believe’ - Opinion p26, The Times, Tuesday 16 September 2008
- (2) John Buckeridge, ‘Face the Music’, Interview with Laurence Singlehurst, Christianity magazine, September 2008