

“Fearless”
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Wheatley United Reformed Church
18 May, 2014
Acts 7:55-60
John 14:1-14

Prayer: God of hope, source of life, faithful giver of eternal life: grant us ears that hear your truth, and voices with words that are bold, and glad to speak it. Amen.

Earlier this week, a court in Sudan sentenced a 27-year old pregnant doctor to death by hanging for apostasy. They also demanded 100 lashes as punishment for marrying a Christian man. They found her guilty of converting from Islam to Christianity, despite her testimony that she has always been a Christian, having been raised by an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian mother; her Muslim father had abandoned the family when she was just a girl. Nonetheless, the court ruled that because her father was Muslim, she had illegally converted. She was given three days in which to renounce her Christian faith, or accept her death sentence.

You may be wondering how this could happen in a United Nations member state. Naturally, there’s more to the story. A Sudanese statute passed in 1991 makes it illegal to change religion there. And, in spite of the country’s new 2005 constitution containing a bill of rights that matches the international human rights standards required by all U.N. member states, that statute was never wiped from the books. It was that statute that was used to convict Mariam Yehya Ibrahim Ishag this past week. This is the first time that particular statute has been invoked, and experts in Islamic law are decrying the ruling as outrageous, claiming that it’s being used as a political ploy by the Sudanese regime to appear as ‘defenders of Islam’ to mitigate their corruption.¹ Like too many countries in that region just now, religion has been invoked as a justification for abuses of political power.

Reuters news service reported in January of this year that, around the world, Christians killed for their faith nearly doubled in 2013 from the year before—up from 1,201 in 2012, to 2,123 in 2013.² If any of us here this morning were under the illusion that the issues plaguing the earliest Christians are no longer a problem, then that statistic, and the goings-on in Khartoum this past week, and Anoon’s story from the Christian Aid video ought to dispel that.

According to the account in our first reading, it wasn’t long after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and tensions were rising among the Jewish people. Increasing numbers of people following the Way and teachings of Jesus, those who accepted him as the Messiah, were posing a growing threat to the traditional Jewish leaders. People were seriously beginning to question their religious and political authority, as they witnessed

¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/05/sudan-plays-down-death-sentence-apostasy-201451711382250183.html>

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/08/us-christianity-persecution-report-idUSBREA070PB20140108>

the apostles doing miraculous works of healing, and speaking with utter clarity, conviction, and power in Jesus' name.

What happened then—some 2,000 years ago—still happens today. Just watch the news: when certain leaders feel that their authority or power is under threat, there's a tendency to try to clamp down on dissidents—even if it means falsely accusing them of crimes they didn't commit, artificially invoking religious laws, and sentencing them to death. It happened to Jesus. Likewise Stephen, who'd been appointed by the apostles to help with their rapidly-expanding work after Jesus' example. Except that the newest apostle wasn't given a trial so much as an inquisition by the Sanhedrin. And, when Stephen told off the leaders for being stiff-necked people who were *inhibiting* rather than *doing* God's work, and when he further suggested that it was the likes of them who were responsible for Jesus' murder, they were incensed.

You'd think, given the reason he was selected for his role, Stephen might have had enough social intelligence to stifle himself at that point. But the author tells us that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and had no fear: not of the rulers, nor of death. The final straw was when he gazed up to heaven and enthused over a vision he had of the risen Jesus standing at the right hand of God in glory. Here's where a lack of curiosity, and overly-literalistic interpretation of poetic language and visionary imagery can cause all sorts of trouble. The Jewish lawyers took this as blasphemy, and decided not to wait another moment to deal with it. As a mob, they dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death.

It's an amazing study in the power of fear—and what can happen when we overcome the power of fear by investing our confidence, *not* in the ways and temporary realities of this life, but instead in the God who is the author and endless renewer of life. Stephen, a potential example to each of us in our moments of darkness, was confident in God's faithfulness—and in the fact that, although his life in that moment might be finished, he had an eternal identity and life in the God who loved him to the end, and even beyond. It was a real experience of God's boundless love, and Stephen's relentless desire to share it, which enabled the man to echo Jesus' words of grace and forgiveness toward his assassins as they pelted him with stones; it was complete confidence in Jesus' life as the Way, and the Truth, and the Life that emboldened him to ask Jesus to receive his own spirit.

Stephen's killers only *thought* that was the end of it. They were afraid of the power they saw in that man of God, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. And they thought they had snuffed out the problem with Stephen's death.

But God has this thing about resurrection, and about death not being the end of anything, really. Like the fountain that will not stop running despite the dam that's built to impede it, the Spirit of God cannot be deterred; it just finds another, more powerful way. If we'd read a little further into Acts Chapter 8, we'd have heard: "That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria." The believers were driven out of the Holy City, and the Good News began to spread far and wide, beyond the confines of Jewish enclaves, and into Gentile homes and communities. Now there was no containing it.

Actions by fear-filled men and women seeking to preserve their own power and authority in this world last only for a time. That's not to say that the actions of fearful, hate-filled individuals are not capable of wreaking the most horrendous suffering on others: we hardly need to grasp for examples—the families of some 276 young women kidnapped by the militant insurgent group called Boko Haram are enduring unthinkable stress and anguish; Anoon and her family has suffered profoundly; there is deep distress in Mariam Ishag's situation; and, closer to home, countless human beings suffer silently in their own houses at the hands or words of a family member or close friend.

It's common to the story (and stories) of our faith. Stephen was falsely accused and had rocks thrown at him until he died; Jesus was mocked, flogged, stripped, and had nails driven through his hands and feet before his body was made to hang to death, attached to pieces of wood.

But if history and the eyes of faith reveal anything, it is that those who trust in the endless, transforming power of God may indeed suffer—even suffer profoundly. But they will inevitably experience divine power redoubling, and the full power and glory of resurrection unfolding in front of them and within them and through them.

One of the most difficult lessons Jesus' disciples had to learn—one that so many of us still have to learn to this day—is that our human habits and expectations regarding power are generally just plain wrong. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus' first followers had this messianic vision of a strongman who was going to liberate the people from the tyranny of political oppression. But then, right before their very eyes, he was seemingly defeated by oppression.

They believed that their Messiah had arrived to usher in an eternal kingdom of peace—and they thought they were ready to be right by his side. But then they experienced horror beyond their most hideous nightmares. And their experience caused them to re-evaluate everything about who *they* were, and who they were becoming. It would be a while before they realised that, even if the Messiah was not immortal in the way they had expected, the messianic message is eternal: death will have neither the last, nor the lasting, word.

It was only as the power of the risen Christ appeared to them—each time in the guise of someone they didn't recognise at first—demonstrating time and again that the way, the truth, and the life that Jesus embodied was and is fully in God, and God fully in him, that they began to understand what divine power is *actually* like. It is not self-seeking or fearful, nor is it egotistical or filled with hate.

The power of God that Jesus came to reveal and to share with all the world is the power of Love itself: nothing less, and nothing more—because there is nothing greater. It sounds a bit simplistic, but this is the whole truth: Love changes everything. It's as profound and as simple as that.

As the Christian Aid video made clear, Anoon has suffered in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. But miraculously, she tells a story of hope and resurrection: hers is not one of defeat and death having the final or lasting word. Rather, she speaks of her hope in

God, and her vision of a future that will know peace and security. She has experienced first-hand the ways that God is constantly at work, employing the goodness and generosity of others who wish to share God's love and healing power—even with people they do not know.

Despite the threat of her life in the balance, Mariam Ishag has refused to renounce her Christian faith. Still, the conclusion to her story—her appalling trial and hideous sentence—has not yet fully unfolded. But her personal courage, along with the massive international outcry, the solidarity from around the world by people of every faith and none is simply confirmation that there is a force more powerful than fear in this world, and it always triumphs.

The world may tell a story of corruption and greed, of fear and political power taking the day, not to mention the lives and security of many. But there is another story of tireless, relentless Love whose steady work cannot be stopped, whose power and hope keeps on moving in spite of fear, in spite of death. This is *our* story. Thanks be to God. Amen.