

Sermon

St Peter's Brighton Beach

Sunday 10th July 2022

The Church of St Francis in Owo, Nigeria

Luke 10:25-37¹

Five weeks ago today, in the Church of St Francis in Owo, a town in southwest Nigeria, our brothers and sisters in Christ gathered for Sunday worship. It was then that gunmen drove up to the church, where they opened fire, killing 50 Christians, and injuring many more.²

You should have heard much about this incident, but you likely have not. In a western culture now more or less dominated by atheism, there is little or no sympathy for Christianity, or for the plight of Christians. Lest Christianity become the victim, and become revered again. The blood of the martyrs are the seed of the church.

¹ **The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

² Sermon inspired by article 'Christians Matter' by Greg Sheridan in *The Australian* 21 June 2022.

It may as a surprise to you, therefore, as it has to me, that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world today. And yet we hear little or nothing about that fact.

Worldwide, Open Doors is a well respected Christian organisation that takes the time each year to monitor and report on the persecution of Christianity, and Christians, worldwide. Its latest report makes for some truly alarming reading. Today more than 350 million Christians face the risk of persecution, in more than 50 countries. Nigeria is the most violent nation on earth for Christians to live. Afghanistan is now the worst country in the world for Christians to live, replacing North Korea at the top of the list in the past year, after the return of that country to Taliban rule. In order, the highest levels of persecution facing Christians are Afghanistan, North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Eritrea, Nigeria and Pakistan. With the exception of North Korea, all Muslim countries.

For many years, the Christian church in the west has called upon western governments, rightly, of course, to protect the human rights of Muslims living in western states. In the same way, it is right, of course, for the Christian church in the west, to be calling upon western governments, to protect the human rights of Christians living in Muslim countries.

At the same time, the Christian church in the west, may take the time to remind western governments, that its own core values, of religious tolerance, on the one hand, and human rights, including the right to

religious freedom, do not exist everywhere throughout the world today. Nor did they come to fruition within western society, or can be sustained, without the spirit of Christianity there to undergird, nourish and sustain them. All people – every individual – is created in the image of God. All people – every individual – is equal in the sight of God. All people – every individual – has the right to the freedom of religion. Has the right to the freedom from violence. Regardless of creed, race, or gender. It is Christianity that says that, and that won that, for all within western society. In fulfilment of the apostolic testimony that now ‘there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.’

Of course the Apostle Paul did not mean that human beings are no longer these things. That creed, race and gender are not important. But that within the Christian religion these distinctions are transcended, in Christ. So that in Christ, the Christian church is to be a fellowship of human beings, throughout the world, characterised by the principle of equality. That whatever inequalities exist within the secular sphere, are transcended, within the Christian church. So that already now, the Christian church, is to be a sign of the future fellowship of the human race, in the kingdom of God. A sign of the future destiny of the human race. So that, by the living out of those values, those values may continue to have a civilising influence, a cultural influence, a positive influence, upon the political order, of the post Christian world.

The West was born in Christianity. But it has rejected it. It must turn back, if it is to be a civil society, a civilised life, a civil culture. And the Christian church is there, to show it the way.

It is only in the West, that Christianity is in decline. Outside the west, Christianity is on the rise, throughout most of the world. Christianity, in Africa, and in Asia, is on fire!

Outside the west, atheism is on the rise, only in China. And there the communist government's attempts to rid itself of Christianity have been fantastically unsuccessful. In 1949, when the communists took power, there were four million Chinese Christians. Today there is somewhere between 60 and 120 million.

Local journalist Greg Sheridan writes, 'The intellectual leadership of Australia will not cry out for this, but the Albanese government could scarcely perform a better service to humanity than to take up the cause of religious freedom. The rest of us should at least spare a thought, and if we can manage it a prayer, for persecuted Christians around the world'.

'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?'

'The one who showed him mercy.'

Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise'.