

Revelation 7:9-17
Downing Place URC
26 January 2020

In 1586, a man walked past a church in London. This is Henry Barrow, who is depicted in the stained glass window of this church. At this point in time, he was a courtier to Queen Elizabeth I, and had a reputation as a gambler – he used to boast, it was said, of spending his winnings ‘in the bosoms of his courtesans’. Walking past the church he heard someone preaching an impassioned – and evidently loud – sermon, and said to his friend: ‘Let us go in and hear what this man says, that is [so] earnest.’ His friend said: ‘No!’ So he went alone, and heard God call him to change his ways and take the Christian faith seriously.

Which is what he did. But he ran into a big problem, because he found that he couldn’t take his faith as seriously as he wanted to in the Church of England as it then was. Because this was a Church that every person in the country was required by law to attend, on pain of severe punishment; but when Barrow read the New Testament, the church he saw there was a voluntary community, a place of freedom, of commitment, of sincere belief and holy life.

So Barrow left the Church of England, found other likeminded people and joined an underground church in London. They met secretly, in lofts, in fields, in ships, in each other's houses, because it was illegal to have any churches other than the state church.

Their services were raided, and Barrow's good friend John Greenwood was arrested and put in the Clink prison. This is the man who stands beside Barrow in the stained glass window. Barrow paid Greenwood a visit to cheer him up, and when the jailer realised he had the notorious religious radical Henry Barrow under his roof he refused to let him out. Barrow stayed in prison for the rest of his life.

The pair of them wrote an extraordinary series of books, arguing for the faith they held – about books three a year between them, not bad considering they weren't supposed to have pen or paper. One of Barrow's books was written in the margins of someone else's book. Their followers smuggled their writings to the Netherlands, where they were printed, then smuggled the books back.

The Bishop came up with a scheme to send crack clergy to visit the Separatists twice a week and argue them out of their errors. The Separatists ran rings around them, then

published transcripts of their conversations, and the bishop called off the scheme.

Meanwhile, their fellow church members had their houses raided. They were dragged out of their beds; some were kept in irons, some beaten, one subjected to ‘Little Ease’ – a form of torture where it was impossible to sit or lie or stand. Many of them died in prison, Elizabethan prisons being outlandishly unhealthy places.

Barrow and Greenwood were convicted of fomenting rebellion against the Queen. They were taken to Tyburn to be hanged. With the nooses around their necks, they forgave their enemies and asked forgiveness of those they had offended. The sherrif tried to persuade them to recite the Lord’s prayer, because the underground church didn’t do that, they believed prayer should be talking to God in your own words, but Barrow said: ‘Master Sherif, my time is at an end, therefore why should I now pray for daily bread?’ Instead they said they were thirsty, and drink was fetched, and they were hanged.

Barrow and Greenwood’s is not a unique story. The passage we read this morning from the book of Revelation was written

at an earlier time when Christians were being killed for their faith. The writer has a vision of the heavenly throne of Christ surrounded by a countless multitude in white robes and bearing palm branches. Then we are told: 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.' They had lived through persecution from the Roman Empire: some were covered in animal skins and thrown to the dogs; some were crucified; some burned alive and used as torches in the Emperor's garden parties. They had died, and were now with Christ.

The passage in Revelation is full of paradox. The multitude wave palm branches, which in the Roman Empire were a common symbol of military victory, as familiar as the dove is to us as a symbol of peace. Coins often depicted the goddess Victory bearing a palm branch; and for example when Emperor Vespasian conquered Jerusalem, he had coins minted showing him standing by a palm tree with a Jewish woman slumped underneath. So, although the Christians were killed by the power of Rome, crushed by the might of the Empire, yet they are behaving like the victors. True victory, Revelation tells, is not found in shedding blood, or imposing

your will on other people, it is standing up for the truth and holding on to what you know is right, whatever the cost.

Similarly, their robes are white, with heavenly glory, not because they have kept them clean in a cupboard, but because they have been covered in blood. Bloodstains on a white dress, that's a tough one to get clean, isn't it? But they are gloriously *clean because* they have been dipped in blood. Revelation turns the story upside down.

We see the same attitude from the Christian writer Tertullian who lived in the time of Roman persecution:

*We conquer in dying; we seize the victory at the very moment we are overcome ...
The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is seed.*

Tertullian and Revelation were right: the Christian church did overcome the Roman Empire. It outlasted it, it converted it, it stood up to the values of the empire and won.

The problem is that the Church *became* the empire; it took over and spent more than a thousand years imposing its creed upon the conquered, and persecuting those who disagreed, in the same way that it had been persecuted itself.

Church history is my subject. I did a doctorate in it, I've written books on it. I'm glutton for punishment. Nothing, I think, has ever sickened me so much as discovering just how guilty our Christian church has been of persecution. Jewish people particularly, the massacres, the synagogues burned, the armbands they were made to wear (the Nazis didn't invent those, we did), the fear and hatred. Against Muslims too.

And of course Christians have persecuted each other as well, the story of Barrow and Greenwood being just one illustration. Catholics have killed people for being Anglicans, and Anglicans have killed people for being Congregationalists, and Congregationalists have killed people for being Quakers. The church has not always been the body of Christ; sometimes it has been the body of Pilate. So I'd like to leave you with three thoughts on the subject of persecution to end with.

One is that we ought realise how lucky we are that we live in a time and place with freedom of religion. The Roman Empire committed genocide against the church for 300 years. In England, in the 1550s 300 Protestants were burned for their faith. On Easter Sunday last year, three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka were bombed and 253 people were killed.

Christians are enslaved and tortured in North Korea; imprisoned in shipping containers in Eritrea; they have fled by the tens of thousand from Iraq, though many have recently been able to return. In May last year a report for the British Foreign Office found that the persecution of Christians, particularly in the Middle East, was approaching the level of genocide. Some people talk about Christians being ‘persecuted’ in Britain when they’re not allowed to wear a cross in the workplace. I think that does a grave dishonour to those who are genuinely suffering violence for their faith. Let us be thankful for our freedom and safety.

Secondly we ought to stand in solidarity with those who are persecuted for their faith and do what we can to support them. One of the huge privileges of my job at *Reform* magazine is that I get to interview very interesting people, and a few years ago I talked with Bishop Egoni Pushpa Lalitha, the first female bishop in the Church of South India. I asked her what her message to western Christians was. She said: ‘We don’t want your charity; we want your solidarity. Christians in India are suffering. We want to know that you care, we want you to speak out, we want you to pray.’ There are Christian organisations, like Open Doors, Christian

Solidarity Worldwide & Release International supporting the persecuted church, and they deserve our support. It would be even better to see Christians supporting people of all religions who suffer for their faith. Christians have been the cause of suffering among other faiths and we should also be the solution. As Jesus told us: the question “Who is my neighbour?” is not about race or about religion, but about whether I am showing mercy.

And finally. Let us *honour* those who have gone before us. I must admit I have no confidence at all that if it ever came to the crunch, I would have the strength and courage to give my life for what I say I believe. I hope I would, but I’m not confident. So I salute those who have stood firm to the death, I honour their courage and steadfastness, and I thank them for passing on to us the faith and the truth that we stand in today. That countless multitude have washed their robes and made them white, and bear the palm branch of victory. We thank them, and salute them, and pray to have a share of that same spirit.

Amen