

Pentecost 3 Persecution and Isolation

Islem*, in North Africa, was brought up in a Muslim family. When she was in primary school she happened to see a Christian woman thanking God in prayer on the TV. She was surprised, thinking, “In Islam we always ask God for things, but we never gave thanks for them.” She wanted to find out more about Christianity, but knew she couldn’t ask her family, her father would be very angry, even violent.

She had some friends in Syria who were Christians, so she asked them for more information about Jesus, but she also told them about Islam, so they ended contact. At that time she thought there were no Christians in North Africa - she thought she would be the first, if it was possible for a Muslim to be a Christian. Except for Egypt, the number of Christians in N Africa is tiny; the laws and restrictions from governments, society and family are severe. It can be very isolating to follow Jesus and not know anyone else who follows him too. Telling a Muslim about the gospel is illegal.

When Islem was 15, she was in hospital with an infection. Home life was difficult, with her father becoming aggressive towards her mother, and Islem was struggling psychologically. On return she moved with her mother to live with grandparents. Now she had a smart-phone, and she connected to Facebook, only to see a page called ‘Christians’ (in her country, which has to be secret). “It was so strange for me, but I clicked on it and sent a message.”

At first people were hesitant to respond, because Islem’s Facebook page clearly showed she was a Muslim. Believers in N Africa have to be very careful when responding to someone they don’t know. Thankfully, they eventually realised she was genuinely seeking. She spoke to a pastor, and he arranged for a Bible to be brought to her; a girl came with her brother and invited her to a group they called ‘church’. Isolation was overcome for her.

*Islem is not her real name, for security reasons.

And so she found a community of believers to learn from, and grew in studying the Bible and prayer. She was delighted, and grew in faith, and was eventually baptised.

‘Open Doors’ lists 50 countries where 260 million Christians are suffering persecution that is very high or extreme. That is up from 245 million last year. Altogether, that’s one in eight Christians worldwide facing persecution that is high, very high or extreme.

Our reading today is from Matthew 10: 24-39. Jesus has been sending out his disciples to go without any provisions, and gave them authority to share the gospel, heal the sick and cast out unclean spirits. Now he is warning them of the persecution they must expect: rejection, humiliation and loss will be normal; loss of both life and reputation. They are to carry the cross, and bear the cost.

And so they did – and we are the beneficiaries of their faithfulness, and of those all down the ages, who have made the gospel alive to us, just as it was to Islem. There’s so much to be thankful for. What’s interesting is that the church in countries where Christians are persecuted is growing. In our country, the church is shrinking!

Are we called to share the good news too? Obvious answer; but how? The first thing is to pray for some others we know, and keep on praying for them; and to love them, being kind and generous, living the Christian life to its full as an example to them, as much as we can, with the Lord’s help.

Then, in conversation, when someone mentions a problem or an illness a person has; it’s quite acceptable to say, “May I pray about that in my prayers tonight?” And really pray for that person, take an interest in their future. They may not believe for a long time – just like Islem; but the seed has been sown in their hearts. God’s influence is there. Don’t be afraid you will put them off; it’s more likely they will respect you for your genuine love and concern

A Prayer:

Dear Lord, give us the confidence to share our faith;
help us not to be afraid that our friends will be upset,
but to be guided by your Holy Spirit,
filled with your love and concern for others.
Inspire us with the stories of Christians around the world.
and grant them rest from their sufferings.
Come Lord Jesus,
Amen

For further reading: the Epistle for today is: Romans 6: 1b-11.

What can I do for the persecuted Church?

You can pray: think about them in their suffering. Women are doubly persecuted not just because of they are persecuted for being Christians, but also because of their vulnerability, and they suffer horrific attacks. Churches are being destroyed. If you wish to pray for only one country, then North Korea, Afghanistan and Somalia are the top 3 countries where Christians are persecuted. Open doors will send you free information (below)

You can give: You can give North Koreans a Bible to strengthen their faith, or food and medicines to help them survive. These will be smuggled in by some incredibly brave people.
To donate, ring Open Doors on 01993 460 015
Or email: inspire@opendoorsuk.org
Or look at their website: inspire@opendoorsuk.org

You can speak out: tell other people, talk about it with others in the church, and with your friends, help them to know what is happening.

Notices. *In your last Messenger you will have seen that some of our churches are able to open up to everyone for private worship. We are happy to announce that all of our precious 4 churches are able to open:*

Flecknoe is open every day as before.

Willoughby is open every day from this Sunday, 9.30am to 6pm

Grandborough is open on Sundays from 9.30am to 6pm

Leamington Hastings: can be opened on request – see notice or ring Brian on 01926 632 917, or Sue on 01926 632 471 or Bob on 01926 632 823 to arrange a time to visit.

Each church will be equipped with sanitiser – please use on entry and exit, and rub hands for 2 happy birthdays!

We hope that you will be able to enjoy the peace and gentle space in these sacred places, where villagers have prayed and rested through plagues and pandemics through the ages.

*2 deaths recently: Bob Gerrard's funeral was Thurs 18th June
Also Vera Lynn, great singer and encourager in the 2nd WW.*

Services this Sunday for those without computers:

The BBC service this Sunday is at 11.45 pm BBC One

The Revd Dr Paul Mathole, Rector, from Holy Trinity Platt Church in Manchester.

And at 8.10 on radio 4 there's Sunday Worship called, "Images of Fatherhood."

The Daily Hope line is free – just ring 0800 804 8044 It's very good!

And for those with computers:

Coventry Cathedral produces it's online Eucharist at 9.15 - 9.45

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpA7lpINnXF-5NAPwSV8vAw> on YouTube