

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 21 Year C 2022

In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped hundreds of girls from their school in Chibok, Nigeria, taking them deep into the Sambisa Forest. Two weeks later, one militant faced his prisoners as they crouched in the dirt beneath a tamarind tree. He paced in front of them, waving a Quran and a Bible. To say that Jesus is the Son of God, he told them, was blasphemy. For girls to be educated was forbidden - haram. This fellow shouting at and threatening these poor girls was Aliyu Ahmed. He had once appeared on a YouTube video executing prisoners with an axe. Islam was the true religion, he screamed at them, and the girls were infidels. He offered them a blunt choice: "You can convert to the true Islam, join us, and please God. Or you will be executed."

When Boko Haram stormed the school in Chibok, they were not looking for girls - they were looking for a brickmaker to service their far-flung camps, from which the Islamic terrorist group staged shootings, suicide bombings, and kidnappings in major cities. Boko Haram's usual practice was to kidnap boys to serve as child soldiers, and they had expected the school compound to be deserted. Instead, they found around 270 terrified girls. Impulsively, they herded them into pickup trucks and took them along. The story was only reported locally. It took a tweet to draw the eyes of the world to the violence that had been raging in Nigeria for years.

An international campaign began to rescue the girls. The campaign, however, had unintended consequences. The world's media attention turned the girls into Boko Haram's most valuable asset. The terrorist leaders saw the girls as their claim to fame, and likely lengthened their prisoners' captivity.

While the world demanded their return, the captive girls were under relentless pressure to convert to Islam and marry militants chosen for them. They were threatened with beheading or brutal slavery if they refused. Many of the girls, paralyzed with fear, succumbed. Others buckled under the brainwashing of a militant assigned to inculcate them into the doctrines of Islam. He forced the "daughters of infidels" to take hours-long classes in which they memorized the Quran. The girls were told that if they married, they would receive homes, slaves, and honour.

But others, in secret, shared Bible passages and prayed fervently together for strength and rescue. They sang hymns into their hands and cups of water to stifle the sound.

The girls wrote lyrics they didn't want to forget in the notebooks they'd been given for copying the Quran. When the militants discovered they had a Bible, the girls buried it for safety. When the beatings intensified, they took turns fasting for strength. And when the roughly two dozen of the resolute girls were told that their choice was between Islam, marriage, or hellfire (they presumed this meant execution), and that they had two weeks to decide, they fasted and prayed. After a week, they told their captors that they didn't need any more time. They were told to write their names down - in black for Islam, in red for Christ. One by one, they wrote their names in red. When the militants attempted to starve the girls into submission, many chose fasting in response. How could they be threatened with starvation if they chose it?

The girls did not know it, but while they endured these trials, a massive search was underway. The Nigerian government hunted for the captives desperately; American drones flew over their heads; negotiations started, sputtered, and stalled. Ten of the girls were killed in a Nigerian airstrike intended to take out the Boko Haram leader, and the rest - those who did not succumb to the sexual servitude of forced "marriage" - lived in terror. Negotiations finally succeeded in May 2017 when the girls were released into the custody of the Red Cross. Of the 276 that were kidnapped, 164 have been freed, 112 remain officially missing, and at least 40 have died. The Red Cross reports that at least 22,000 northeastern Nigerians are missing.

Many who sent out #BringBackOurGirls tweets forgot about the story within days. But we could take lessons from the story of their courage, their suffering, their faith. It is worth taking time with the story, I think, because it is contemporary. This is a story of our time. Stories of such heroic virtue we perhaps imagine as belonging to the long-distant past. But here were these girls - simple village folk - who knew their faith, encouraged each other in their faith, and looked evil in the eye and defied it.

In the early church, these girls would have been called 'confessors'. They may not have been martyred for the faith, but they maintained the faith - *confessed* the faith - even in the face of extreme opposition and persecution. It's worth telling this story at length because it reminds us that the Christian faith is worth standing up for. These girls recognized that the claims of Islam are false. That its promises are false. That alternatives to the gospel are false. These girls were convinced of the *truth* of the gospel, that the claims of Jesus Christ and of his church are true. Even the threat of death could not extinguish this.

Our Lord in the gospel today says, *Strive to enter by the narrow door, for many I tell you will seek to enter and not be able.* The students kidnapped by Boko Haram show us what this looks like. We see in their example what it means to enter by the narrow door. They had open to them a way of accommodation, of compromise. They could have chosen another door, a door that rejected their faith and denied their Lord. A door that offered them safety in return. They chose the narrow door.

Now, what we hear in the gospel today is but one example of many found throughout the gospels of the *exclusiveness* of the kingdom Jesus proclaims. The point is emphasised by the parable that follows. A door is closed firmly in the face of those seeking to get in, with the master of the house saying, *I do not know you.* It is a dimension of Jesus' teaching that perhaps unnerves and unsettles many contemporary hearers, at least in the West. The example of the Nigerian hostages is worth telling and worth remembering because it challenges this nervousness. And because their story is such a stark contrast to what we may call the 'pseudo-gospel' of progressive positivism. In this pseudo-gospel the message is not one of conviction, of standing for truth, of the unique claims of Jesus Christ, or of the exclusive demands he makes. Instead, the pseudo-gospel that has hijacked so much of the church in the West speaks about love, acceptance and tolerance. This is what Jesus was *really* on about. But no one honestly reading the gospel can come to the conclusion that Jesus is proclaiming an open door, a free for all, an anything-goes policy!

Of course, there is an openness in the kingdom of God. Of course, there is inclusivity. From east and west, north and south they will come to take place at table in God's kingdom. This wide horizon is anticipated in the first reading today from Isaiah, of God gathering nations of every language to himself. In a marvellously vibrant image, we are told people will come *on horses, chariots, litters, mules, dromedaries to the holy mountain.* This universal vision of course realised in Jesus Christ, lifted high on the Cross his arms outstretched to embrace the whole world. So yes, in the kingdom there is inclusivity, there is openness. But - and this is important - it is not a permissiveness openness. It is not naive inclusivity. The full picture of the gospel must be held together, and in that full picture are the *exclusive* claims of Jesus Christ. Because only this will inspire commitment. Only this will inspire a willingness to enter the narrow door whatever the costs. The girls kidnapped by Boko haram could hardly have defiled evil if the gospel of Jesus Christ was just about inclusivity and tolerance.