

Sermon Easter Day 2020

My dear brothers and sisters, near and far, the great message of Easter is that Christ is victorious! One of the enduring and most popular depictions of the resurrected Christ is of him bursting from the tomb, surrounded by light, bearing the marks of his passion, and holding aloft a banner of victory (similar to the one on the cover of your service order). The banner is white, to show that the battle is over. And on this an empty cross, to show that that the instrument of Christ's death no more has power over him. Death is vanquished. It is conquered. Christ is victorious!

In Syria - so decimated by the bloody onslaught of Islamic State - in the small border town of Kobani, is a community who have converted to Christianity from Islam. The town had been besieged by IS until the tide turned against the militants. The converts say the experience of war and the onslaught of a group claiming to fight for Islam pushed them toward their new faith. After a number of families converted, the town's first church opened last year. Though Islamic State's ultra-radical interpretation of Islam is rejected by the mainstream, the legacy of violence has affected perceptions of that faith. One man, 22-year-old Maxim Ahmed, who lost an arm in an explosion in Kobani and fled to Turkey for medical treatment, said he met Kurdish and Turkish converts there and eventually decided to join them. 'They seemed happy and all talked about love. That's when I decided to follow Jesus' teaching.' Christ victorious!

For 70 years the communist party in the Soviet Union waged a war on religious belief. The regime sought the complete annihilation of religious institutions and ideas. It destroyed churches; it executed religious leaders; it flooded the schools and media with anti-religious propaganda. Lenin demanded that communist propaganda must employ militancy and irreconcilability towards all forms of religion. What became known as known as "militant atheism" became a central to the ideology of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. For 70 years faithful believers found themselves subjected to this anti-religious law and propaganda severely restricting the public practice of faith. But in the end - and despite everything the state could throw at it - the majority of older Soviet citizens *retained* their religious beliefs. And a crop of citizens too young to have experienced soviet-era oppression have discovered it.

Faith was maintained without churches, without public worship, without clergy and all the structures we normally depend. The spark of faith kept alive and held dear in the hearts and households of faithful lay folk. Today, between a half and two-thirds of all Russians identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. Since the fall of communism, about 25,000 churches have been built or restored in Russia. Christ victorious!

In 18th Century France during the two-year period known as the Reign of Terror, persecution of the church grew more violent than any in modern European history. The new revolutionary authorities suppressed the Church, abolished the Catholic monarchy, nationalized Church property, exiled 30,000 priests and killed hundreds more. In October 1793, the Christian calendar was replaced with one reckoning from the date of the Revolution, and included festivals of Liberty, Reason and the so-called 'Supreme Being'. Under threat of death, imprisonment, military conscription, and loss of income, about twenty thousand priests were forced to give up their parishes and hand over their letters of ordination. Many abandoned their pastoral duties altogether. But some continued secretly to minister to the people.

Most French parishes were left without the services of a priest and deprived of the sacraments. By Easter 1794, few of France's forty thousand churches remained open; many had been closed, sold, destroyed, or converted to other uses. But all this simply forced religious worship into the people's homes. It increased the involvement of the laity. And this lay the foundation of the religious revival that took place in France in the nineteenth century. Christ victorious!

The first three hundred years of the church's life saw ten large-scale state-sponsored persecutions. Tens of thousands of faithful men, women and children met their ends for holding fast to the faith of Christ. Yet during this time when it was dangerous and illegal to hold the faith, when it seen as dangerous and subversive, (as every tyrannical powers since has continued to see it), the faith spread rapidly and shook the ancient world. It transformed every community to which it was proclaimed. It crossed every social, economic and class divide. It drew to it people of every culture, race, language, sex, education and profession. In a way utterly unknown in the ancient world people were brought to share at the one table, to profess one faith. Christ victorious!

And sometime around the third decade of the first century, a man, crucified for being dangerous and subversive, suffering the most horrific and violent death cruel men can impose on others, was abandoned by those he loved and placed in a borrowed tomb. And that was supposed to be the end of it. The stone rolled in front of that tomb was supposed to fix the matter, to end the influence of this man. The days he lay in that cold, dark tomb was meant to be the start of that process all dead men undergo. Except it didn't. The violent, bloody death, the stone at the entrance, the three days in the tomb were not end. Christ broke forth. Christ was victorious. Christ *is* victorious.

Hardship, oppression, persecution has been the constant companion of the church. Ridicule, marginalisation, suspicion, this is our lot. And in fact, privation and adjusting to unusual circumstances is a regular feature in the church's story as well. Plague and pestilence have also visited us in our long history. But what has allowed Christian individuals and families and churches not only to survive, but then flourish, rests on *exactly* what we celebrate today: conviction that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead *is true*; conviction that he is able to conquer all; conviction that sharing in Christ's life means sharing in his victory; conviction that Christ can continue – through every generation and for every people - to be known, loved and adored.

For those of us who are traditional, conservative and orthodox in our faith and practice we ought to know that what we are currently experiencing is just a test run. The true time of trial is ahead of us. We would do well to learn the stories of the faithful and brave forbears who have likewise endured the time of trial. The story of the church is the story of sharing Christ's victory. Every age. Every community.

The shocking realisation that slowly dawned on the first friends and followers of Jesus was that the powers of death did not have the last and final word. Christ was victorious. And faith in this – this which we celebrate today - reverberates throughout every generation and every land. When every mechanism of an empire, or state, or tyrant, and even of plague, pestilence and a now for us a virus, is aimed against us, these things are not victorious. English writer G. K. Chesterton once wrote, *Christianity has died many times and risen again: for it has a God who knew the way out of the grave.* Difficulty, hardship, privation, persecution, yes, these visit the church, and now even visit us. But they never have the last and final word. Shortly we will sing: *At the Lamb's high feast we sing, Praise to our victorious King!* On this Easter Day, let this be the hope that sustains you: Christ is victorious! Amen.