



August 7th

THE NEW SHOFAR

Give to the blind, the sick, the lame and the destitute; if you don't, they die. Men may have no use for them, but God has. Lactantius

There are no easy ways of being a Christian

In 2018 a Chinese pastor was sent to gaol in China for nineteen years. In a letter smuggled out to the west shortly after his detainment, Pastor Yi describes his philosophy on suffering, ...*The gospel demands that disobedience of faith must be nonviolent. The mystery of the gospel lies in actively suffering, even being willing to endure unrighteous punishment, as a substitute for physical resistance. Peaceful disobedience is the result of love and forgiveness. The cross means being willing to suffer when one does not have to suffer. For Christ had limitless ability to fight back, yet he endured all of the humility and hurt. The way that Christ resisted the world that resisted him was by extending an olive branch of peace on the cross to the world that crucified him.* This kind of thinking and acting established a firm and enduring foundation for the early Church as it suffered through all levels of persecution and martyrdom.

It is important to remember that while Pastor Yi was speaking specifically of physical suffering – jail in China for a dissident would not have been easy – his words apply to every aspect of our lives, particularly our lives of faith. There will be many things that challenge us and *lead us down roads we do not wish to go*. If that were not so, we are probably not quite living as Jesus has called us to be living. He did, after all, remind his followers of how they would be expected to take up their cross and follow after him.

Be persecuted but do not fight back!

The very structure of their faith—grounded in Christ's sacrifice—forbade revenge and, even more amazingly, demanded compassion, toward enemies. It is no wonder they stood out in the pagan society of the time! They were visibly different in every aspect of their lives. They did not run around preaching the Gospel in the city squares. It was their public witness to Christ at work within them that challenged the status quo in so many irritating ways. Just living the Gospel was perceived of as being a threat because that message was built on love, respect, mercy and kindness. Within fifty years after the death of Jesus, there were widening state actions against Christians in the important Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus (modern Turkey). By the year 112 it had become the norm in this region to pursue, interrogate, and execute Christians. Here is the Bishop Ignatius writing on the proper approach to persecution. He wrote it while he was on his way to his own martyrdom. *Pray continually for the rest of humankind as well, that they may find God, for there is in them hope of repentance. Therefore allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. In response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to*

their slander, offer prayers; in response to their errors, be steadfast in the faith; in response to their cruelty, be civilised; do not be eager to imitate them. Let us show by our forbearance that we are their brothers and sisters, and let us be eager to be imitators of the Lord. You can easily hear the voice of Jesus resonating in his words.

All of this was possible because Christians believed

It is not simplistic to put down this attitude to their “persecution” to their faith. Many of us today would say we are men and women of faith but we do not all respond to “persecution” in the same Christ-like manner. They believed how the Risen and Glorified Christ was working in them and through them to change. This global transformation could not be achieved through politics, through financial activities, politics, the judiciary, or the military. The world could only be refreshed and committed to a new direction through a living faith in Christ’s death and resurrection. While today’s world may struggle to believe in the miracle of the resurrection, the first Christians really believed it. They believed in a Risen Christ who was with them and in them and through Christ there was forever a light shining in the darkest of their days. Christ rising from the dead was seen as the proof and pledge that as God vindicated the suffering Jesus, so to he will one day vindicate his suffering church.

Disregarding Christianity on the basis of the poor performance of the Church is a bit like dismissing Johanne Sebastian Bach on the basis of hearing a primary school student attempts to play Beethoven’s 1812 overture on the recorder.

Why is this of such importance for us today. It is because they believed they had already won battle against evil (as manifested in the might of the Roman empire). Yest, they were being persecuted and martyred but in simply remaining faithful to their baptismal vocations and imitating Christ in all things, the victory was theirs. What was the worst the Romans could do to them? Murder them. Execute a people who believed that just as Christ was the firstborn from the dead, they too would rise and be with him.

What this did to the Jews and the pagan Romans was to leave them intrigued, curious about the source for their joy in the face of death, their willingness to love, forgive, show mercy and embrace the very people who were harming them.

But of course not all Christians persevered in faithfulness

There was another reality not often acknowledged. Sometimes faith did waver, sometimes their very humanity overwhelmed, and they merged their lives back into the ways of the world around them. It was tough being a Christian and they felt it was no longer worth the struggle. In reality the demands of Kingdom living were simple and clear: As they awaited the return of the Son of Man in glory all they needed was a perseverance in prayer, in charity, living witness, and endurance in hardship. Jesus would enable them to all of these things and through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, transform their struggles and hardships into acts of redeeming love. Through them the Kingdom was already being planted, graced and was growing.

