



THE ARCHBISHOP  
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day celebrating the contribution of Christians in the Middle East.

Credit: Westminster Abbey

When the church of Jesus Christ is attacked, it is an attack on Christ Himself. When any part of the church suffers, we also suffer, and yet distance and ignorance take away the pain we should feel.

Today, we must open ourselves afresh to the pain of those caught up in a region of suffering. Each place in the region is different. In some the Christian community flourishes. In others it is under terrible threat.

Yet across the Middle East each church has members who face pressure. And they feel the pain. We too often only see the struggle at a distance, across a chasm.

The Book of Job is full of what seem to be insurmountable gaps and chasms. The power of its tragic drama is found in the way that these gaps and chasms relate to our own experience of life.

There is the chasm between Job and his comforters. There is the chasm between Job and God. There is the chasm between God and the comforters, and indeed between God and all others who participate in the book. The gaps and chasms are created by the experience of suffering.

For suffering, and especially persecution, is something that isolates. Those outside its experience cannot say "I know how you feel" because they don't. To live in a country, or in a society where a government, or an armed group, or even a minority of people consider that you should be consigned to oblivion because of your faith in Christ is an experience that is without parallel.

So when we hear the reading from Job, we find that it is God who crosses the gap. And God crosses the gap, not to Job's comforters, to correct their theology, but simply in awe and power and questioning to Job himself, that he may know, without detailed explanation, that God is indeed the Lord.

In Advent we hold together the condescension of God who makes Himself visible, touchable, with the assurance that He is also the one who will return and bring all injustice to an end. The great gap is crossed only by Christ Himself.

Therein lies the comfort. Not that there is explanation, but that there is justice and sovereignty in God. No human power, no force of sin and evil, has the capacity to overwhelm the insurmountable and extraordinary grandeur and glory of the God we worship in Jesus Christ.

Yet, there is something else. The Book of Job is not called the book of gaps or chasms but is named after its suffering hero. Those who remain faithful in suffering are beacons and lights of hope and an inspiration to us all. To you who are from the region, we owe a debt of profound gratitude. For your suffering calls us to faithfulness, and to fellowship.

And that takes us to the Gospel reading. The purpose of a light is to draw attention, and the purpose of the intention is to find hope and direction. Your light has indeed shone.

One thinks of the martyrs on the beach in Libya, of those countless killed in Iraq and Syria, of the faithfulness of Christians in parts of the region that are secure and stable, who have maintained their worship, welcomed their refugee brothers and sisters in Christ, for example in Jordan and Lebanon, and thus shone a light around the world.

How should we respond to that light? We should do so by being drawn towards it, to stand with those who shine it, to remember it and to learn the lesson that comes from it. For that is the light of obedience. It is the obedience of the Christians across the region, in good places and bad, who through their obedience are children of God, are brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ.

As indeed are we. And if our relationship to those brothers and sisters is genuine, then we must in this service commit ourselves not to rest until in obedience we build bridges to those who are isolated by suffering.

Obedience is the proper response to the revelation of God, acting in a way that pursues the values and the aims and the calling of the Kingdom of God.

Obedience for Christians outside the Middle East and outside areas of persecution is to ensure that governments, that households, that societies welcome the afflicted, pray for the suffering, stand with those in torment, rejoice in liberation.

Obedience is to allow the Spirit of God to renew in us constantly the hope that we find in the revelation of God to Job, in the resurrection of Jesus, even in the baby in the manger, and finally in the great judgement that will remove all impunity and bring all deeds to light. Amen.

4 min read

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