

Revelation. The Church at Smyrna – a Persecuted Church
Revelation 2 v 8-11

Christians seeking permission to build a church in an Asian town for the past 10 years have been accused of “fuelling sectarian conflict” by protesters. In another country two Christians have been fined two months salary by a court for reading a Christian book at work. Frequently Christian ministers are arrested and taken into custody for doing what many of us do without thinking any given Sunday. We can read material from charities like Open Doors and Barnabas Fund telling how countless Christian brothers and sisters worldwide are being brutally abused, driven from their homes and businesses and even murdered by their neighbours. 2000 years after our Lord’s death and resurrection, the Christian Church is being persecuted more than ever!

By the slander of religious extremists, by official injustice, through social and physical hardship and in many cases by horrific violence. It would appear that the demonic anti-Christian forces which were at work as the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation at the end of the 1st century AD are busier than ever at the start of the 21st century.

Jesus’ second word of comfort and instruction through John is to a congregation in the 1st century city of Smyrna, a group of believers who were facing growing opposition. He tells them not to be overcome by fear but to be faithful even to death, and assures them they will be rewarded by God.

Smyrna was a magnificent city of the ancient world, famous as the birthplace of Greek poet Homer and a city of culture, home to many temples and to many so-called ‘gods’. It was a city loyal to the Roman empire and had erected a temple to the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Citizens would on occasions be required to perform a nominal ritual as part of their civic duty and say “Caesar is Lord”. But how could Christians declare a mere man to be divine, on a par with our Lord Jesus? While they paid their taxes and sought to be

good citizens, many of them refused to perform this ritual and suffered for it.

Polycarp would have been a young Christian in his twenties when John's Revelation was first circulated with its message to Smyrna to stay faithful to Jesus, Who after all had suffered first for us all and was now risen and glorified. Many years later Polycarp, now in his 80s and Bishop of Smyrna was brought into the arena and urged to say 'Caesar is Lord' or be killed. "For 86 years I have served Him (Christ) and He has done me no wrong, how then can I blaspheme my King Who saved me", the old man calmly replied, and so they burned him at the stake.

The amazing thing here is not the suffering of Christians – that, along with love, seem to be standard marks of authentic Christianity. Those who love and seek to follow Jesus can expect, like Him, to suffer jealous resentment and opposition from many of those around us in the world.

The wonderful thing is the courage, the calmness, the lack of bitterness, the almost joy with which Christians through the ages have faced cruel persecution, even death. The spite of the devil and paranoid cruelty of some human beings are never the end of the story. Jesus speaks to these Smyrnan Christians who are suffering what He calls affliction and poverty - literally troublesome burdens and lack of resources that would normally crush people, and tells them that they are 'rich', rich spiritually in the grace and blessing of Almighty God. For while Christians may be hated by the world, we are dearly loved by our Father in Heaven. We are forgiven, justified, vindicated by Him, in Christ. And while we live under threat of mistreatment and death in this life, we are assured of honour and rest and eternal life to come in the Kingdom of God.

Don't be afraid, says our Lord. Yes we may face trials for our faith but these can test and prove and ultimately confirm and strengthen our faith. The devil is a liar and a loser. Jesus is the victorious One, the Good Shepherd who saves and keeps His flock in both peaceful green

meadows and the valley of the shadow. He stands with us and works all things together for good when we love Him. Through our tears we come to trust and love Him more, sharing His victory and His joy.

Note the period of suffering is limited. It won't be over in a day or even two. We may feel imprisoned and wonder will the suffering ever end, but it is a time known and limited by God, and when we emerge faithful on the other side we are promised a 'crown of life'. The picture is not of a royal crown but a laurel wreath presented to the winner in the arena or a garland given to guests at a dinner.

Jesus urges us to be faithful in the challenge we will inevitably face in the short term, promising that long term we will be honoured and welcomed in God's home, at God's table forever, when these limited troubles are finally over. No condemnation on God's Day of judgement for us! No hellish lake of fire, no 'second death' for those whom Jesus acknowledges as His redeemed and faithful.

So in some parts of the world at the moment it's not a crime to be a Christian. We enjoy relative freedom. Opposition and persecution are more subtle. In the current post-modern atmosphere we are often tempted to just "go with the flow" in society, to keep our faith in Jesus private, our beliefs non-exclusive, our religion popular.

They say Polycarp was well liked in Smyrna. The city officials pleaded with him to just go along with the social custom and all would be ok. But he and others would not deny their profession of "Christ alone". Following the example of the apostles who considered it an honour to be mistreated for Christ and the Gospel, Polycarp and others went to their deaths, almost *cheerful* to serve their Master with such ultimate sacrifice!

We should not be masochists seek suffering and persecution and we must not minimise the agonies or human rights abuses of the suffering church worldwide, but let all Christians hear our Master's message to Smyrna and be determined to live, and if necessary die for our Saviour secure in this knowledge- that whoever acknowledges Jesus

as Lord before men will one day be acknowledged by Jesus as His
before the angels of God in Heaven.

Glory to His name!

Amen