

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers:
Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who
had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

Acts 13.1.

Hardly a day passes now but that we hear yet another outrageous story of some Christian being harassed somewhere in our country. A nurse is threatened with the sack for the evil crime of offering to pray for a patient. A foster mother is struck off for 'allowing' a 16-year old in her charge to convert to Christianity. The word 'Christmas' is considered so offensive that it is replaced with the absurd word 'Wintermas' although the witless jobsworths who dreamed that one up hadn't the brains to notice the Christian word 'mass' at the end of 'Wintermas'. Head teachers are hounded for having the temerity to hold a Christian assembly in school. You would never know from all this that the 1993 Education Act actually states that school collective worship should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'? Nor would you realise that in the 2001 census for England and Wales a whopping 73% of the population considered themselves Christian. The census also records that the next biggest religion is Islam with - guess how much ?- 2.7% You wouldn't know that the Church of England is established by law, and that our Head of State is an anointed Christian monarch and Supreme Governor of the same Church of England. Now, of course, the law may one day change, and so may the statistics, but that is how things stand today. So this idea that Christians are somehow 'intruding' in our national life is utter tosh. What is *actually* going on here is an ideological struggle by atheists, and these atheists are a very tiny elite of governors conning the governed.

Now it's very easy to get angry about all this, or even to become depressed and defeatist. That is certainly what the tiny elite would *like* you to become. I want to look at the situation in our nation from another angle, from the Bible.

If you as Christians feel harassed by the State in 2009, go back to your Bible and remember that that was how it was 2,000 years ago, and not only did the Church survive, but it actually grew. When *Acts* was being written Christians were being arrested and murdered. We've already seen the stoning of Stephen. In chap 12 we read how King Herod Agrippa murdered James, and arrested Peter. Soon the days would come when Roman emperors would throw Christians to lions. It would be 300 long years before an emperor, in the person of Constantine the Great, would become a Christian. And yet somehow the church grew. Look at *Acts* 1.15 on p1092 - only 120. Then 2.41 - 3,000. 12.4 - 5,000. Go now to 12.23-24: Herod is struck down, *but* (wonderful word!) the word of God increased. And that was the template: eventually the mighty Roman empire came crashing down, just as the atheistical Soviet Union finally collapsed in our own day under the weight of its own contradictions. But the Church continues today to grow and grow. Why? Because it is true, and Jesus is the Truth. You must have confidence in this. If Herod and Emperor Nero and Josef Stalin and Mao Tse Tung couldn't crush the Church, I wouldn't get too bothered about a third-rate politician or some twerp in the town hall. In fact they are helping us. They push us back to our roots. They also *flatter* us. They shew that we bother them. No-one ever bothered to persecute the WI. In the 3rdC Tertullian

stated that the 'blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. Let's remember that this is *Christ's* church: he has promised that the gates of Hell will never prevail against it.

Let's look now at *Acts* 13 where the Holy Spirit sends Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Look especially at v1 ... It is Manaen I would like you to note. That is a Greek form of the more familiar Hebrew name, Menachem. But what is really important is the bit in brackets: 'Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch)'. The Gk is *συντροφός* which means 'foster-brother'. So here we have one of the first Christians, Manaen, and he was brought up in the royal palace no less. There's a myth that the first Christians were poor, low-life types. Not true! And if you go forward to the next passage, you'll see at 13.7 Sergius Paulus, the Roman pro-consul ... He too became a Christian, v12...

God knows what he is doing. Even though the forces of evil opposed the Lord Jesus and his followers, he had placed Christians in strategic positions in every level of society. And that is still true today. The head of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannatt, is a committed evangelical Christian. He was on the same staircase as me at Hatfield College, Durham. 2009 is the bicentenary of Charles Darwin's birth. Here is the chance for the Darwinian atheists to have a bash at stupid Bible-believing Christians. But hang on a minute. Last Sunday in the chapel of St John's College Cambridge the sermon was given by Professor Simon Conway-Morris, Professor of Evolutionary Palæobiology at Cambridge, a committed Christian. So even in the heart of the Darwinian

establishment God has placed his followers. Today's church isn't - pardon me - filled just with old ladies. It has some of the most distinguished people in the land. Our hospitals have Christian doctors, nurses, and all manner of other health-professionals, strategically placed. So do our schools. In industry, commerce and business, in the civil service at every rank, in politics God has placed Christians.

On our own we may feel overwhelmed. What can we do as individual believers against the relentless attacks on Christianity? Well, remember that it was like this 2000 years ago in The Roman empire, and the Church grew. Remember also that it is *Christ's* church, not yours. And remember that on your own you may indeed be a feeble little light in the darkness. But there are lots and lots of feeble little lights, more than you realise, and God has placed each one of us just where he wants us to be. It really is a case of 'You in your small corner, and I in mine'. Just be faithful and true.

You aren't living on the street where you're living by chance. Nor are you working where you are working by chance. God has placed you there for a reason. He has a strategy and he knows exactly what he is doing. We may not understand his strategy, but he is on the throne. Your job is just to shine in your small corner. Shine for Jesus. That doesn't mean you have to be converting everyone around you all the time. But don't stop being a Christian at your place of work, in your street, or family or club. Let people see the Christ in you. If you let him into your life, he will shine from you. He has placed you where you are for a reason. So stand up for Jesus.