

## A SERMON

from *John 15.18-21* on the Suffering Church  
preached at St Paul's United Reformed Church, Harrogate  
by  
Dr Patrick Sookhdeo,  
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on Sunday, 28 September, 2008.

Shall we pray together?

*Most gracious heavenly Father, we thank you for your great love for us, for sending your only Son to be our Saviour and for giving to us the gift of your Holy Spirit. We pray that you would indeed lead us now into your truth. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.*

I thank you so much, Minister, for so kindly inviting me to be with you both last night and this morning, and, may I say, for you as a church, for your prayers, for your support, for your encouragement as we of the Barnabas Fund engage in this ministry to the suffering church.

When we read a passage like this [*John 15.18-21*] and we hear the words, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first," [v18], what comes to your mind? *Hatred* is the word, the kind of word we tend to keep away from. The idea of hating or being hated could not be further from any one of us, because who wants to hate and who wants to be hated? And let me come to persecution. "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will also persecute you," [v20]. Again who wants to be persecuted, and who wants to be a persecutor? You know these are very difficult words emotionally to get round.

There is a person I've known for some time. He was born in Syria and he became a Christian, and when he told his father that he'd become a Christian, his father took a glass, went to a cabinet and took out poison, and poured it into the glass, and went to his son and said, "Take this and drink it". The son looked at his father and left the home. He did not return for about 40 years. When I knew him he was quite elderly. He said, "I went back to see my father. By this time he was immensely ancient and when I went into the room there was still the glass of poison and he presented it to me, at which I walked out. And I realised that I will never see him again." An old man. Hate, persecution.

A young lady in a part of Saudi Arabia, most recently became a Christian. She took to reading her Bible and recording, (what you could say?), her spiritual journey in a little book. One day her brother came into her room saw the book, read it, gathered the father, the mother and the family, took his sister, and together they bludgeoned her to death. Hate, persecution.

I was in Pakistan not so long ago, in Islamabad. A young man had become a Christian from a Muslim background. He married a young lady who was an orphan girl, a Christian girl. Fifteen truckloads of police, so I was told, descended upon his home, carted him off to prison where he was beaten, tortured, charged with blaspheming against Muhammad. He, so far as we know, is languishing in a prison in Islamabad. His wife has disappeared. What does it mean to be a Christian in today's world?

Certainly back in Great Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> centuries faith had its dangers. When I go up to Scotland I look at the Covenanters' memorials and things of that nature. There was a time in British history when to be a Christian meant something which involved pain and suffering. It experienced the wrath of a world that could not understand it. There was hatred and anger, leading to death more often than not. Today that is increasingly the reality of the experience of many Christians, particularly in the Muslim world, but not only there, in other contexts also.

"You are not of this world" [v19]. Here is Jesus saying, "You belong to me. I am your Lord. I am your master. You are my servants, you are my friends. I now own you and possess you, and you belong to an altogether different kingdom, to a different realm. And because this world which lies in the hand of the Evil One seeks my destruction, and then the destruction of my reign, my power, my authority, my realm, so it will also hate you and seek your destruction, because you represent me here on earth. For you, the Disciples of Christ, are the physical, the living embodiment of me that will one day reside in glory, but you will be here on earth. And as representatives of this new kingdom you will experience the hatred that I once

experienced, and the persecution that I once experienced. And so they will seek your removal and they will seek your destruction in our world today.”

So how is this basic reality being worked out? If I may suggest to you, it is being worked out in five very simple ways:

The **first** is the position of *government*. Whether or not we like our government, and whichever hue, it is always something you can find fault with. But there is one thing which we can be fairly assured of: the government and her institutions and law enforcement agencies are there to protect us and our way of life, and, in religious matters, our fundamental freedoms. And so we live in a society based on tolerance, on justice and the rule of law. And so we come to believe that the virtues we have here in our own land is replicated across the world, which we know actually is not true. And in today’s world many governments are looking particularly at Christians saying, “What are we going to do with them?”

If I take Iraq as a case study: I was mentioning last night that, when I first went into Iraq in Saddam’s day in 1991, Christians were generally accepted. There was a Foreign Minister who was a Christian. The head of the Republican Guards was a Christian. The former Air-Vice Marshal of the Air Force was also a Christian. In other words, Christians were embedded in all walks of life, the professional, the educated, very well respected. And although Saddam was an evil man, you could say that he generally accepted the lot of Christians, and he saw them as beneficial. So whilst there were not overall freedoms, there was security and stability that allowed for Christians to function. When I returned in 2003 after the second Gulf War, that position was to change substantially. For the Christian community there were degrees of freedom, degrees of security and degrees of stability. For Christians today there is huge difficulty. A part of it lies in government, for Iraqis were pushed into an election much, much too quickly. They didn’t want it. And as a result of the elections the country became fractured in terms of religion and ethnicity. So when you think of Iraq you think of Sunni, Shia and you think of Kurdish Arabs. But where are the Christians? The Christians were there before anyone else. They were Assyrian Christians. I could be preaching now to an Assyrian congregation. They are more European, blond hair, many with blue eyes, very different from the Arabs. They were the original inhabitants of the land, and many became Christians in the early days of Christianity and subsequently. So the Government, when the new constitution came to be written, (which was brokered by the British and the Americans), allowed no place for Christians. Christians fell through the cracks. And so why should the Government protect them when they have to protect Sunni, Shia interests, Kurdish interests? Why bother with the Christians? And when you don’t have the military to protect and the police to protect, because they all protect their own, Christians found themselves unwanted, vulnerable, weaker. There are now only about a thousand or so Christians left in Basra. How do we get them out?

So the issue of the role of government has become very important in our day. You take the Maldives. I don’t know if anyone has been on holiday to Maldives. I want to run a campaign against people going to the Maldives on holiday. Now you might say, “Why do you want to do such a thing?”

At the end of August the Maldives constitution was changed and this was the first government of the world to bring about this change. It states basically that unless you are a Muslim, you cannot be a citizen of the Maldives. Overnight the government rewrote its constitution and then put it into effect at the end of August, and there was no world outcry. A first world Christian community overnight have lost their citizenship; they’ve been disenfranchised. They have no belonging, no human rights, no religious liberties. A government can simply take that decision, and say, “Our people are always going to be Muslim. Any non-Muslim, anyone who becomes a Christian from Islam, loses all their citizenship, all their freedoms and all their rights.” Our government did not intervene. In fact a few years ago our Queen knighted the then Prime Minister of the Maldives. The UN have not objected. There’s been no uproar, and we are living in a day where increasing governments in the Islamic world, as you see also in Buddhist and in some post-Communist countries, are saying to themselves, “Well, where do we locate Christians? It’s best if we simply forget about them, and make sure that our country stays where it is.” So that’s the first big issue which Christians are now facing on a global scale.

The **second** is linked to that: it’s *nationalism*. My wife and a colleague, we were in St Petersburg and then in Moscow in July. We were with the leaders of two of the largest Protestant denominations in the former Soviet Union, but particularly strong in Russia are the Baptists and Pentecostals. Both leaders said to us that today, now in Russia, in terms of religious freedom, is far, far worse than in the days of

Communism. So we scratched our heads and said, “Surely this can’t be correct!” And this is the case, you see, because in the days of Communism you had forms of legislation which guaranteed basic rights. It may not be much but we could always refer back to a law. What Putin has done has removed all of those laws, and Christians, particularly Protestants, are seen to be transplants of the West and therefore they have no protection. So the Pentecostals told us of a certain place where the local authorities wanted their church because it was in a city centre position, and promised them that they could have money and land elsewhere to rebuild. Having signed away their church, the authorities simply looked at them and said, “We are not going to give you anything. You have no rights.” And this issue of nationalism, (because this is what it is), is growing at a rapid pace. If you look at a place like Sri Lanka, it is *Buddhist* nationalism: “Our country is Buddhist.” If you look at the most recent problems going on in India, in Orissa, with many being killed, what is it? It’s *Hindu* nationalism. In other words, more and more countries are saying, “These Christians don’t belong. They’re a suspicious bunch. We’ve got to watch them, because they have missionaries that come and go. They can actually go to America or Britain and those governments can intervene on their behalf. We’re not quite sure we want them in our midst.”

And do you know, nationalism is a very, very powerful force. You know what happens when it takes extreme forms, such as Fascism. It can put people into gas chambers. And particularly after 9/11, two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (wars of terror) have led many people now to associate Christians with Mr Bush and Mr Blair. And so who are Christians? Where do they fit into the Middle East, to places like India? It is better to be rid of them. And this growing nationalism is seeing more and more pressure being put upon a Christian community.

I touched on India. You know, the position in India is most acute. The recent killing of Christians, the anti-Christian violence, has been the worst ever since their independence in 1947. Thankfully *The Times* yesterday [27 Sept. 2008] had devoted a whole page to it, but it’s very interesting. The news media as a whole does not report what is happening.. And you now literally have hundreds of churches being destroyed across India. You’ve got the BJP which is a Hindu nationalist party. You’ve got the RSS. The BJP and RSS are now enshrined in government, in regional government, and they can say, “You Christians, we want you out.” And where are they going to go? “Our country is what? Not ‘India’, but ‘Hindustan’, the land of the *Hindus*”. So where do Christians exist, if the land has the identity of the religion, whether it be Islam, Buddhist or for that matter, Hindu?

The **third** difficulty Christians are experiencing lies with the new formations of *terror groups*. Al Qaeda: there are Buddhist forms of it, Hindu forms. New organisations, new bodies that engaged in armed conflict with the purpose of seeing Christians removed. On our web site last week we put out a press release on a village in Indonesia where the Laskar Jihad has now returned, and they destroyed the village and killed some of the Christians, destroying all their churches. Round about the year 2000, the Laskar Jihad decided to eradicate all traces of Christianity from the Maluku [Indonesia]. Tens of thousands of Christians were massacred, thousands of churches destroyed, many, many tens of thousands were displaced, and became refugees. The Government intervened through its troops but now they have returned. And who is going to stop the growth of Laskar Jihad as now it focuses again on the extermination of the Christians? Take Pakistan. Where is Pakistan today in terms of its church?. There are over 3½ million Christians. But the radical groups that are fighting our forces in Afghanistan are the very ones who are also attacking Christian communities in the North-West frontier.

We come back to Iraq. We saw the failure of government. When you come to nationalism, there is a potent mixture between nationalism and Islamic terror groups, both Sunni and Shia in the country. Last year in Baghdad, Islamic terror groups posted letters to various Christians and effectively they said this: “you convert to Islam, or else we kill you, or else you leave.” 60% of Christians in Baghdad fled. I had to get from Basra up to where Ur of the Chaldees is [Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldees, *Genesis* 11.28]. Dhi Qar used to have a very strong Christian community. There are now three Christian families left in the whole area. You will have heard of General Petraeus’s stabilisation plan and the success in Anbar Province. What you don’t hear is that all Christians have gone; left the whole of Anbar Province. So what has happened now is that these new terror groups, unable to attack UK and American forces, have turned their attention on to the Christian communities, as in, “We’re going to hit you.” And so we have increasing numbers of kidnappings or beheadings or deaths of Christian leaders and of others as well. And this issue of violence is one which we need to look at, whether it be major violence in terms of a whole community being attacked or whether it be individual violence.

I was in Sudan in the middle of the 1990s and for me I think Sudan was one of the great tragedies of our modern age. When you think of the 20<sup>th</sup> century you think of Fascism and Communism, but we forget the Armenian genocide where over 1½ million Armenian *Christians* were massacred by Ottoman Muslims between 1915 and 1920 or so.

When we go back to 1980 the Sudanese Government in Khartoum sought to impose Islamic law and the Arabic language on the south, mainly Christians. May I say, I was in the 1990s with the Presbyterian Church, the PCOS, which is the Presbyterian Church of Sudan, again, mostly in the south. Between 2 to 3 million Christians died. That's how many died. I was in a village and we had one of those little houses you are given when honoured guests come. And there was a cross on top of my house, and I looked, and other people had crosses and I said, "Why have you put a cross up there?" They said, "It isn't just to show you're a Christian. The aeroplanes will come, and, because we don't want them to kill non-Christians when they drop their bombs, we put up crosses, so they know where to drop their bombs. And the machine-gunners will come because it's bush and when they rake the area they will see the crosses, and they will know who to kill."

If I can tell you this: when my little light aircraft landed on a dirt strip, there was a great throng of people, most of them half-naked but the piece of cloth they had, they had painted crosses on it, and they were carrying crosses. And everywhere they went they carried these crosses, and they knew they would be killed. The tragedy was so many of them died and we did nothing. Today, the new forms are now the militias, the terror groups, and you see them in Iraq. You see them in Pakistan, in Egypt, in Nigeria, in Indonesia. And how will Christians survive the new terror groups when we ourselves can't deal with a Bin Laden and an Al-Qaeda? For we in Britain now know what it is to be threatened as a society.

The **fourth** area of difficulty has to do with *law*, Sharia. I touched on it already with Sudan. Sharia. Let's come back to Iraq. In Saddam's day there was no Islamic law, for Islam was not embedded in the secular, Baathist Government. But in the new constitution after the recent elections, Islam became a part of the legal framework of Iraq for which we British were responsible, as well as the Americans.

Now you may say "Does it matter?" Christian ladies, three of them in Baghdad are told they must now conform to Islamic law. They must be fully covered. They refused. They, together with six members of their families were beheaded. Simple as that! If you do not conform to Islamic law today in Iraq, with all British and American coalition forces, most probably you will be killed. And the big debate now across the Muslim world is: why can't they have their own law? Now in Britain we have acceded to their request and have imported elements of Islamic law within our common law position. It shows you how far they have been able to achieve it. There are four schools of Sunni law as well as Shia law. They all state that when a Muslim becomes a Christian they commit the crime of high treason, and that carries the death penalty. So why should they be sentenced to death?

Now a few years ago we ran a petition, a programme, a campaign to be rid of this 'Apostasy Law'. It went all the way up to Prince Charles and he convened a meeting at Clarence House. All the key Muslim leaders were there, the Bishops of the Church of England; and others, and I was asked to explain my problem. So I decided I'd be honest, open and I spoke of Sharia and the Apostasy Law. The Prince, I must confess, was quite moved and so he looked at the Muslim leaders and said, "Surely this is wrong. Why can you not change this law?"

They looked at him and said, "Your Highness, we cannot change this law because this law comes from Heaven and we cannot challenge the laws of Heaven." All they could then say was, "Well, Your Highness, Sharia is not in Britain, so it is not being enforced". But now Sharia *is* in Britain. At what point will people like me suffer? Now you may say "Oh that's an extreme case, and Muslims will never call for someone to be put to death here in England." By the way, they are, if you saw the undercover Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme from the Regents Park Mosque in London on 1 September this year that actually calls now for the killing of all converts. But you see, Apostasy Law has two sides to it: one is the penal death: the other is social discrimination. When a person becomes a Christian, if he's married, he loses his wife, his children, his inheritance, the whole lot. If it's a woman she's even in a worse state. So the Muslims may say, "We're not going to *kill* you", but they could take you now to their arbitration board which is now embedded in British Civil Law [under section 1 of the 1996 Arbitration Act], and then you could lose everything. And what is British Civil Law now going to do? Now, this is how far this whole thing has gone and if the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the most senior judges of our government [Lord Phillips, the Lord Chief Justice] have capitulated on this, what are we going to do if tomorrow you had a convert from Islam in this congregation from, say Iran. Sharia now has a place in British Law and the

Iranian government has now adapted their constitution to make it a criminal offence to become a Christian, even if you are outside of the country. They can pursue you and kill you and the British government says, "Well, we can't do anything about it. Send him back". Or if the Muslim community are then advised, they will say, "Well, don't kill him, but we have to apply our Sharia." What are we going to do? And this is one of the reasons why so many converts are being threatened, intimidated, and why so many are dying. And our government, our church leaders, in particular our *church* leaders, have sacrificed the interests of beleaguered Christian communities and converts from Islam on the altar of inter-religious dialogue and community relations. I think it's good to have dialogue or discussions with other faiths. It is right to have good community relations, but at what point do we sacrifice justice and righteous and our identification with our poor and lesser brethren to appease the powerful?

**Finally**, Christians increasingly are being *discriminated* against and *marginalised*. They are becoming the weakest of the weak.

Iraq: the Christian community has been made up of those who are professionally competent. They were the doctors, dentists, accountants, university professors, people who spoke English well. Today 400,000 Iraqi Christians are now in Syria [ironically another secular Baathist state constituted like that of Iraq under Saddam]. Many other hundreds of thousands are relocated in the north of Iraq. Others are in places like Britain, Turkey and elsewhere. One of the greatest Christian communities, under our hands, our Government, and the US, has been effectively destroyed, reduced to abject poverty. Our petition on Iraq will go soon to our Government and I hope if you haven't signed it, you will. I have discussed this with the Foreign Office, but you know, if you were to say to our Government, "You are allowing many Muslims across the world to come into Britain, including from Iraq. Can you not take in a few Christians?" they would say "That's discrimination". We are now in a position where Christians are actually being sent back. Back to where? To the hell which we have created. And when you go to a Pakistan, to an Egypt, the once great noble Christian communities are increasingly being reduced to poverty.

We in the Barnabas Fund unashamedly exist to argue for the rights of Christians. *Galatians 6:10* is our divine mandate. It says, 'Do good to all, *but especially to the household of faith.*' We have a duty, a responsibility, to care for our own.

Our 'Suffering Church Sunday' material focuses on *Matthew 25*. But who are 'the least of these my brethren' in v40? The early commentators, many throughout history, were solid that the argument is that they our Christian brothers and sisters, not the world's poor. We have been so afraid to grapple with that, that we care for everybody else's poor while we forget our own Christian brothers and sisters. Their blood cries out, "How long?"

We must pray for them. We must support them. We must stand with them, and, if it means saying to government and the House of Islam, "You must cease persecuting our brothers and sisters," then so be it! And we must learn that basic lesson that their lot is our lot. For we share in their life and they in ours, because, together, we share the life of Jesus. We are his body here on earth, and, as the world hated him, so they will continue to hate us. And as they persecuted him, so they will also persecute us [*John 15.20*].

AMEN.