

Persecuted yet not defeated

⁸ *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.*

⁹ *“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander^[a] of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’ Revelation 2:8-11*

- ✚ Persecution is a theme least talked about in Christian circles
- ✚ We are more inclined to talk about the privileges that come with being a child of God
- ✚ We are more excited about the power of God and blessings that are promised.
- ✚ Consequently there seems to be passages in the scriptures we never reflect on or appropriate:

³³ *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33*

¹¹ *“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11*

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. John 15:18-20

Because we have not engaged with the fact of persecution in the history of the church, there some things I wonder about:

- While the object of our faith is the same as that of those who have gone before us, is the nature of our faith the same? When the first century church committed to follow Jesus, were they committing the same way we do today? May be not
- How long can our faith last? How low is the breaking point of our faith? I am not saying that we need to look for and pray for adversity but, will the anchor of our faith hold in the heat of persecution?
- How do we support fellow Christians who are being persecuted? Do we judge them for not praying enough?

Bishop Kivengere comments about the atmosphere in Uganda after Amin had murdered Archbishop Janani Luwum:

“A great international funeral had been planned for Sunday, but the government refused entrance to the important foreign visitors who wanted to enter Uganda for it. Nevertheless, on Sunday February 20, 1977, the great cathedral on

Namirembe Hill was packed with 4500 people, inspite of the threats by Amin's authorities. People could not stay away. It was a powerful service.

Leaving the building, some Christians were heard to say, "if I don't die too, I may be missing out on the great crown of glory!"

Outside the cathedral, many went and stood around the open grave, which had been dug for our late archbishop near that of bishop Hannington and that of Alexander Mackay, who won to Christ many of the young martyrs of a hundred years ago.

Retired Archbishop Erica Sabiti read the angels' message to the women on the day of the Resurrection: "He is not here. He is risen!" Then he said, "Our brother's body is not here, but we know that his spirit has gone to be with the Lord Jesus. He has risen. Praise the Lord!" Heaven was near and people began singing, softly first, "Glory, glory to the Lamb!" It was picked up and passed on until the hilltop was resounding with victorious singing". **Bishop FestoKivengere, I love Idi Amin**

- I hope you sense the courage the Ugandan church had in those dark days
- I hope you discern the strength of their faith
- You and I need to ask, is that the nature of the faith I have?

We are reflecting on **Persecuted yet not defeated**. Let us go back to our text:

1.0 The way Jesus introduces Himself to the church at Smyrna, resonates with His message about persecution

‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

- ✓ Jesus is the one who is victorious over death
- ✓ He is the first born from among the dead
- ✓ He has the keys of death and hades
- ✓ Because of Jesus, we can say with apostle Paul,

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ *“O death, where is your victory?*

O death, where is your sting?” 1 Corinthians 15:55

- i. When Jesus is around, death changes its meaning and loses its power
- ii. Dying for our faith in Jesus should not scare us that much because Jesus is in control.

- iii. The greatest threat to our faith comes from within. External enemies are not as strong as we often deem them to be. Jesus said, ²⁸ *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell Matthew 10:28*

Should anything come up which threatens our life because of our faith, we need to look to Jesus, the one who died but He is now alive.

2.0 I know your tribulation and your poverty

He says, I am aware. I am present in your circumstances. I am paying attention to what is going on. I know the genuineness of your faith.

Friends, this is the hardest part of our text: We respond, Lord if you know, what are you doing about it? Lord how can you all this to happen?

- ✚ This is a challenge to most of us with regard to what we expect the Lord to do when we are trouble or in dire need. We expect the sovereign Lord to step in. We expect the Omnipotent One to act,
- ✚ It is the challenge that God allows bad things to happen to bad people – **that the Lord who rescued Peter from prison was also present when Peter died as a martyr.**
- ✚ Christ's love changes meaning in the context of suffering and persecution
 - ✓ His love remains
 - ✓ So we must ask, how have we construed God's love?

- ✓ I think we can see God's love as sustaining grace in the midst of trouble, and not as taking away all trouble.
- ✓ Also, some things will remain kept from us until we see Jesus face to face.

For many faithful believers, Jesus says,

- I know that you lost a job because of your faith
- I know that you have not gotten a business contract because of your faith
- I know that you got a poor grade because you could not sleep with that lecturer
- I know that you were thrown into prison because you chose not to be compromised.

God knows. Let us continue to trust Him even when we have unanswered questions.

I know the pretenders – those who call themselves Jews but are not. Opportunists. The tares in the wheat. The wolves in sheep's clothing

3.0 Do not fear what you are about to suffer

Jesus says to the church, there is coming a satanic onslaught.

- When those who persecute you think that they are doing the will of God

Here we need to think about structural oppression against the Christian faith. Indifferent generations Satan puts in place human systems to oppress men and women of faith

The case of William Tyndale:

William Tyndale believed that people in England should be able to read religious books - especially The Bible - in their own language. Sixteenth-century leaders of the Church vehemently disagreed. So did the King of England - Henry VIII - and so did English law:

In England, under the 1408 Constitutions of Oxford, it was strictly forbidden to translate the Bible into the native tongue. This ban was vigorously enforced by Cardinal Wolsey and the Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, in an attempt to prevent the rise of English 'Lutheranism'. The only authorised version of the Bible was St Jerome's Latin translation, known as the 'Vulgate', made in the fourth century and understood only by highly-educated people.

A scholar fluent in eight languages, Tyndale came to believe that the teachings of church leaders were not always consistent with the Bible. Furthermore, he wondered what good it was for people to hear Biblical readings and church liturgies in Latin when the only language they understood was English. Tyndale decided he would translate the New Testament into English.

Like-minded people supported Tyndale's efforts. Working in secret, often outside his own country, he published his New Testament - today worth millions of dollars - in 1525. Many of the poetic phrases he used in his translation - "let there be light," "the apple of his eye," "the powers that be" and "eat, drink and be merry" - are still used today.

Not long thereafter, he was "befriended" by Henry Phillips, a traitor who had always planned to betray Tyndale. After he was arrested in Belgium, near Antwerp, Tyndale was long-imprisoned, ill-treated then executed. His alleged crimes were disagreements with the Church's teachings and his English-Bible translations.

Just before he died, Tyndale prayed that God would "open the eyes" of Henry VIII, thereby allowing people in England to have access to their own Bibles translated into their own language. Soon thereafter, that is exactly what happened.

- ✚ The implications of the 5-4 Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriages in the USA. What does that mean for the church and its clergy? What does it mean for ordinary Christians who uphold the teaching of the Bible? What does it mean for preachers from Uganda who minister globally?
- ✚ The church in Egypt has been facing structural oppression for many years – church buildings must not be renovated. Islamic fundamentalism is a threat to the Christian faith. You remember the killings in the Kenyan University.

It is only those who have mustered their fears who can withstand persecution.

Christ calls us to stand firm, even to the point of death.

4.0 Victory through death

Can we speak of victory through death?

Can we say that a martyr has won?

YES we can.

- i. Being able to stand up to the threats of the oppressors is victory. Not giving up at the point of death is victory. Persecutors often want the believer to give up. So when the believer does not give up, that is victory.
- ii. The testimony that comes as a result of death – people get to hear about it and know that there must be something there worth dying for.

As Tertullian famously stated: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”
- iii. A greater award awaits those who stand firm to the end,— Jesus says, that those who die through persecution will not taste second death.
 - Our faith in Christ calls for perseverance
 - Our faith in Christ calls for endurance
 - Our salvation is both granted freely through sanctification and ultimately secured through sanctification and endurance.
 - When you come as a sinner in repentance you are offered forgiveness free of charge but then you need to stand, loyal to Christ to the end.

¹³ ***But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Matthew 24:13***

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

**¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.**

**¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.**

**¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

Conclusion

This is what the Lord is saying:

- I. Stand firm**
- II. Do not fear**
- III. Your endurance will be rewarded**