

# CHRISTIAN MINISTRY UNDER PERSECUTION

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## Ministry and Leadership in a Christian Community under Persecution

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I have had a journey with ill-health since 1975 when my kidneys gave way. Shortly after that my house was burnt. With Andrew Boyd I have told that story in 'Neither Bomb nor Bullet – Ben Kwashi: Archbishop on the front line' (Monarch Books 2019). Now I want to add a further chapter 'Nor cancer' since I have just come through surgery for cancer successfully. My story is how God takes ordinary people and through their experience proves he is in charge of history.

Persecution for the faith is nothing new. A view seems to prevail among some that any form of life that is not pleasant is deficient, and they pacify their conscience by making a donation to charity at Christmas. But persecution in Northern Nigeria is dire. Thousands of Christians there have lost their lives.

I will speak of the biblical basis for addressing persecution, my own experience, what we are planning in the future and then draw conclusions.

### The biblical basis

Jesus promised that his followers will be persecuted and persecution never has and never will kill his church. Jesus himself faced persecution. The religious leaders of the time tried to trick him. He was then betrayed, arrested, tortured and crucified. But the irreversible fact is that he then rose from the dead. Jesus died, defeated hell and all its powers and his victory remains eternal. We can therefore say that persecution will never kill the church. So to fear the powers of this world is not wise because Jesus defeated them eternally. Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! <sup>23</sup> I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; <sup>24</sup> but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." (Philippians 1:21-24).

So either way we lose nothing. If we live we can continue to set captives free; if we die we will see our Master face to face. This is the reason we may look crazy. We may not see the victory now but one day the final victory will be seen. There is a futility about persecution. Stephen, one of the first deacons, was killed. But the church grew. Paul was beheaded, but the churches he founded expanded.

Those meeting at the Lambeth Conference should walk through places where people have been roasted to death. Their deaths should not be for nothing. Persecution is often followed by an upsurge of mission as the church spreads.

### **My experience**

In 1984 I was diagnosed with Renal TB. My doctor was Hindu professor of medicine. Six months after my diagnosis he checked me over 7 days and found no disease in my kidneys. This Hindu professor then turned to Jesus. In 1987 there were riots in Jos. A hundred churches, houses and businesses were destroyed. I wrote to the Christians not to retaliate. This sparked a new wave of confidence in the gospel.

There were more religious riots in 2004 through attacks by the Fulani. In 2008 more Christians were massacred in Plateau State. These attacks continue to this day. Through this the church is being refined. Young Christians are taking the gospel to Internally Displaced People and meeting the needs of the poor. New concern for others emerged among the Christians who began to open their doors to those who were suffering for one reason or another. I can truly say that Christians have become open to others through their own experience of suffering. And they find that the benefits of the Kingdom of God outweighs their own suffering. All their apparent losses count for nothing. They have made up their minds to endure suffering even if it leads to death.

We saw this in the early missionaries to our area. They brought their coffins with them. We have now found the graves of two of them: Dr Miller and Jack Lloyd. We are still looking for the grave of Joyce Webster. We are going to rebuild their graves showing how they dared to face the consequences of hardship. Their work blessed our own grandparents with education, health and the gospel. For many now the rite of ordination is a matter of both pride and of grief; someone undergoing is in effect signing their own death warrant. But the resurrection could not have happened without the death preceding it. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." ( 3:10-11) Facing trials goes with the job. The outcome of years of ministering the Holy Spirit and the Word of God is to prune us to follow deliberately in the steps of the Master.

James wrote: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (1:2-3). Those who think that the Christian scriptures need to be redefined and reinterpreted need to see it already powerfully at work as it stands in difficult conditions. God has been faithful. To deny the scriptures is to turn then to nothing.

Once our house was burnt down and I took Gloria to see it. She said: “You preach that heaven and earth will pass away. This approach has to start with you or people will not believe you.” I put the ashes from this burnt house in a perspex coffin and this goes everywhere with me. It speaks to me that ‘I died on March 12 1987 ( when the house was burnt), and every day of life after that is extra time.’ In 2006 when I was in the UK our house was attacked by a gang of thirty. Gloria was abused. She was blinded in one eye and her legs and toes injured. She had surgery in San Antonio Texas.

In 1988 killers took me outside my house in front of their executioner. He took me inside. I asked to pray and he agreed. Gloria joined me. We prayed and at the end found they were gone. Eternity will reveal why I was not killed then. I have no answers. But I was ignited afresh for the gospel. Persecution shows us new openings God is giving us for mission.

### **The future**

Some new directions are the following. We are seeing the urgency of serving communities in new areas in health care, education and protecting children from abuse. We have adopted seventy children who have no known relatives. We are providing free education, health care and food for 400 children. Some of the children we have helped in the past have gone on to be ordained. Only in this life do we have the opportunity to share the suffering of Christ. As we see children of God who need our help, we are called to bring light to them and the darkness must be consumed.

When persecution happens we should

1) Focus on God only. Isaiah 49:21-26 reminds us to look up to God  
21 Then you will say in your heart, ‘Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left all alone, but these—where have they come from?’ ” 22 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “See, I will beckon to the nations, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their hips. 23 Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.” 24 Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives be rescued from the fierce ? 25 But this is what the LORD says: “Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save. 26 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your

Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

- 2) Settle our priorities in life. When we are comfortable our priorities might not align with God's. There is the futility of amassing wealth.
- 3) Open our hearts and minds to those who suffer the most. The God of heaven who knows what he is doing raises the hearts and minds of Christians to care for all and redirects our attention to those who suffer.

The first time I met with Baroness Caroline Cox she had a book with her that described how Sudan was going through more hardship than Nigeria. Persecution opens our eyes to see others who are being persecuted and keeps us humble. The sense of urgency to help the persecuted means we need to respond now. I have had to think of these considerations:

We had to turn away 130 orphans because of lack of space. So we had to open a second place to extend the hand of Jesus to those in need. These children were living in unsafe places. Girls of 10 to 13 years old were having to turn to prostitution to get food. We have given every child food, education, health care and we seek to lead them to Jesus. We seek to promote honest practice in all spheres of life.

Finally we remember Jesus said they will deliver us up. We should bear witness, evangelism should not stop, and his promise should never be forgotten: “I have overcome the world.” We have a gospel worth living for and a gospel worth dying for.

### **Discussion following the lecture**

Baroness Caroline Cox, founder of HART, noted that their agency was supporting vans being taken around with educational materials and teachers for children who are live too far away from schools. She lamented that the British Government has not been requiring the Nigerian Government to call the perpetrators of these atrocities to account. She also noted that it was very rare to find churches praying for the persecuted church. It is important to remember that when one part of the body suffers, all suffer. (1 Corinthians 12:26).

AB Ben was asked if persecution brought growth or if growth brought persecution. He noted that in 1985-86 he trained people in evangelism and saw the church grow. His style of evangelism is not dialogue. As a result he saw his diocese grow quite large.

He asked whether the attacks on the twin towers in 9/11 was as a result of evangelism. The point he made was that whether we do evangelism or not , persecution will come. But there is no true gospel without peace exuding from those proclaiming it. He recalled a visit from the Deputy Chairman of a powerful Islamic organization in Plateau state. His own father had placed his visitor's father in school. His visitor said: “The God your father served I now see you serving. I want

to serve him now.” He begged him to confirm him in front of 15,000 people. Also the chairman of the Mighty JETS football team came to see AB Ben to become a Christian. These are examples of how the gospel’s peace brings people along asking: “What must I do to be saved?” We should therefore make clear, he said, how we are to proclaim and witness.

He was also asked whether the church should court persecution or live a life of peace and prosperity. In reply he said that Christian leaders should not keep quiet in the face of injustice, whether it occurs inside or outside the church. He recalled raising his voice about drug abuse: those manufacturing and importing drugs are evil people and they are in the church as well he claimed.

On September 7 2001 Muslims decided that a girl had desecrated Islamic prayers. Following that 20,000 people were killed. That is compared with 3000 who died on 9/11. So at a remembrance service in Nigeria for the victims of 9/11 AB Ben challenged the President that he seemed to care more for America ( over 9/11) than the victims of these killings. The next day the President called him and sent the Chief of the Defense Forces to meet him to tell him they were deploying a Special Task Force for Jos.

AB Ben was asked if the current pressure for ‘woke’ culture is an example of persecution or a call for moral transformation. He replied that if people faced persecution for living a godly life, and if they were holding on to godly morals, they should ask why a secular community should impose its secular morality on someone. The church has not yet seen such imposition as a threat yet. But in universities students are being pressured to ‘buy’ good results, and for girls this was in exchange for sex. The problem is that the lecturers doing this come to church. This intellectual persecution is a reality.

He closed by urging his hearers to ensure that we pass the gospel on to the next generation and follow the example of his own father who knew what he was going to lose by becoming a Christian.