

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Elizabeth Ahern

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Recently a group of close friends and I watched the movie/documentary The Insanity of God by Nik Ripken. In this documentary, an American missionary Nik travels to various parts of the world where the Christian church is undergoing persecution. They are called the ‘hard places’ of the world. Often these Christians have to assemble and worship in private and concealed places or ‘underground’. Sometimes they meet in their own homes and only among those most trusted family members. It is just not safe for them to be all out in the open, and often they are a target for harassment by the locals and the authorities. This harassment can escalate to violence towards them, imprisonment and even death. But even so, under the most difficult and vulnerable situations, many continue to gather and worship together and refuse to renounce Jesus as Lord and Savior. Some have even died. Something I appreciate about Mr. Ripken is that he does not try to sugarcoat and he is willing to ask the hard questions. One of these questions is, is Jesus worth it?

One of the most memorable stories is about two young men he meets in a place he calls hell, Somaliland (which is in the horn of Africa) in the early nineties. In war-torn Somalia he is able to work along these men; he worshiped and broke bread with them. Eventually, these two brothers are apprehended, refuse to deny Jesus and are killed. Nik feels terrible that his two companions have perished and he is left with many questions. Is Jesus worth it? He continues on with other journeys and eventually he ends up in China, where the underground church is robust and vibrant, but under much pressure as well. It is common for their leaders to go to prison and they understand the cost. There he is led to a group of Christians living in a compound. The Christians there are in such isolation at this time that they asked him if the message of salvation through Jesus is known in other parts of the world outside of China. He tells them that many have heard the Good News and have believed, and the Chinese rejoice at hearing this. Then he tells them about Somalia and the hardship that the Christians undergo and the two Christian brothers that perished. The next morning he hears a great commotion, so he goes to check out what is going on; there is a multitude of people praying and crying out to God and all he can understand is ‘Somalia, Somalia’. He then finds out through a translator that these Christians were praying for Somalia and they committed to pray for an hour a day and to wake up an hour earlier each day to do so.

The Bible does not sugarcoat persecution either. The account of Stephen’s stoning is clearly described in the book of Acts. Stephen was the first to be chosen of a group of seven to carry out some of the administrative and social works that arose when the Greek Christians complained that their widows were being neglected. The apostles were looking for someone of good reputation full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. In addition, Stephen is described (6:8) as *full of grace and power, [doing] great wonders and miraculous signs among the people*. (NIV) You may wonder, like me, why would a perfectly good man of God get stoned to death?

This early church was growing rapidly, but it was not without opposition. Now there were many groups of Jews (similar to how we have Christian denominations now). This incident started

because a group of the Freedmen—Jews from Cyrene (Libya) and Alexandria (Egypt)—engaged in argument with Stephen and were unhappy with the outcome. So they (6:11) *secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God'.* (NIV) Then Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, the supreme legislative council and the highest ecclesiastical (religious) and secular (earthly) tribunal of the ancient Jews. They produced false witnesses and accused him of speaking against their holy place (where they gathered in Jerusalem) and against the Law. Stephen then testifies, recounting the story of their rebellion from the time of Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses and coming out of slavery, to the time when Solomon builds God a temple, since David wanted a permanent place to worship. Then Stephen tells them, *However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet (Isaiah) says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'* Then Stephen continues with a very politically incorrect statement. *You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it (7:48-53 and 54, NIV).* *When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.* He was voted off the Island—Stephen was not a great survivor ☺.

Back to the Scripture reading (Acts 7:55-60, NRSV). *But filled with the Holy Spirit, (in the face of death, he did not let his heart be troubled—John 14:1) he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.—John 14:7) 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'* (Stephen believed and he saw a vision that brought him comfort). *But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.* (Group think effect). *Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul (or Paul—ironically, Paul will be most responsible for the spreading of Christianity to non-Jews). While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'* (Like Jesus at the time of his death at the crucifixion, he turns to God and commits himself to Him when there is no one else to turn to, and asks for forgiveness for those killing him). *When he had said this, he died.* Was Jesus worth it? The text says that there was a great persecution that broke out after Stephen's death, so the church scattered, but it never stopped growing. In fact Paul eventually converts on his way to Damascus and that is how we too end up learning about Jesus.

Most of us are not going to experience persecution because of Jesus to the point of imprisonment and death. We may, however, experience some form of minor persecution because of the way we have selected to conduct our lives for what we believe is moral. In First Peter the author is addressing this letter to a Christian church located in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) that is undergoing some persecution. These Christians are former pagans and have adopted a stricter set of moral standards. Their former friends and companions have rejected them because the Christians have removed themselves from their past ways of living.

Starting with verse one of Chapter 2: *Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation* (NIV).

When we see ‘therefore,’ you know that it going to ask for some action. What two things must they do to *grow into salvation* and what does *grow into salvation* mean? Let’s look at The Message, which is translated from the original (as we know it) Greek: *So clean house! Make a clean sweep of malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. You’ve had a taste of God. Now, like infants at the breast, drink deep of God’s pure kindness. Then you’ll grow up mature and whole in God.*

So what must we do to *grow up mature and whole in God*? (1) Get your spiritual house in order by getting rid of malice (hatred, meanness, nastiness), pretense (trick, deception, invention), envy (jealousy, greed, resentment) and hurtful talk (slander, vilification, defamation)—you know the synonyms. I am telling you, your spiritual house is God’s dwelling place through the Holy Spirit. (2) Act like a baby, who is completely dependent on its mother’s milk for survival. So must we depend on God’s grace and mercy for everything.

*...if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (If you really get it) Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a **spiritual house**, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame’ (even at the time of great persecution). To you then who believe, he is precious (thus Jesus is worth it); but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall’ (a threat). They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Let’s do our part in directing our lives towards God, cleaning house and then committing to God all suffering. Commit not only your own suffering, but also the suffering of your brothers and sisters in Christ who live in hard places, where Christianity may be seen as a threat, not be well known and may be greatly misunderstood. Jesus is worth it.