

Identity and strength in suffering

For a time last week the news was dominated by the scene of European leaders coming together to resist Donald Trump's expressed intention to increase tariffs if they didn't facilitate his desire to take over Greenland. In their various ways they basically told him he was wrong – hopefully that view will prevail. For me it adds to the weight of evidence that, even post-Brexit, Britain's identity can be and is European. In a way that echoes a statement I heard earlier in the week: that persecution can be a great source of unity and strength.

That was asserted by Bishop Hovakim, Primate of the Armenian Church of the United Kingdom and Ireland, in the videos accompanying the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (of which this is the final day). I've learnt that Armenia was an ancient civilisation, proud to be the first state to adopt Christianity as its official religion, in 301. Subsequently their history has involved domination and oppression from neighbouring empires and states, leading to fragmentation of their homeland, death and displacement of their people and desecration of treasured Christian sites. Armenian Christians experience unity in their coming together across boundaries to confront the opposition they face; in the solidarity they feel with other oppressed peoples in the world; and in the expressions of support they receive from others who don't share their circumstances, but empathise with their plight. The voice we've heard this year in the Week of Prayer is the voice of a Church whose suffering is part of its identity and strength.

As this week I read Luke's first account of the conversion of Paul, the phrase which stood out for me were Jesus' words to Ananias:

*I myself will show him [Saul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.
[For I will shew him [Saul] how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.]*

The one who inflicted suffering on others, in his zeal to cleanse the Jewish faith from Christian heresy, is henceforth to suffer himself in promoting the Lord he previously denied: poetic justice, perhaps. But we shouldn't read it vindictively, for to suffer in the name of Jesus is, for the other apostles in Acts, a great privilege; and something Paul embraces in his letters: aspiring in Philippians, for example, *to share Christ's suffering in growing conformity with his death, in hope of somehow attaining the resurrection from the dead*. In suffering for our faith, Christians follow the way of Jesus, who, expressing the love and truth of God, chose to suffer, rather than retaliate, when he faced his opponents.

On the Damascus Road Saul wasn't only converted in what he believed to be true: he was also converted in his understanding of how that truth was to be promoted to others. He would no longer seek commissions from the high priest to impose his view of the truth with power and punishment, but had received a commission for life from Jesus to seek to convince. This Paul was to approach with no less zeal; but now expressing the strength of his conviction not through the application of force, but by his willingness to suffer for what he had come to know of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

That is a source of encouragement for persecuted churches; and lends a certain authenticity and weight to what they might have say to those who do not suffer to the same degree, or in the same way. But it can also be a source of encouragement for us. In the face of the declining status of Christian faith in 21st century Britain, it asserts us that our identity and strength as Christians lies not in our degree of prominence or power to direct, but in our faithfulness to Jesus, our commitment to the truth about God, and our willingness to go out of our way in expressing that to others, seeking to convince them of the life we have gained through our faith.

But that isn't to say that any of us should think, or need to think, that we have completely grasped the truth about God: there can still be something oppressive about those who think they have, in a very absolute, or narrow way. For them, and for us all, I make the observation that Luke doesn't just tell us about the conversion of Saul, but also about the conversion of Ananias. For all his evident faith, Ananias didn't believe that Jesus could be asking him to go and minister to Saul, the sworn enemy of their Christian community. But he was open enough to be prepared to be convinced; he was faithful enough to hear what Jesus was saying to him; and gracious and courageous enough to go and do it: prepared to suffer if he'd got it wrong. Our commitment to Christ is a commitment to our ongoing conversion. Our humility, our willingness to suffer correction, is yet another aspect of our identity and strength.