

Christmas Midnight 2007

Life to Die For

(Isaiah 52 vv 7-10, Hebrews 1 vv 1-12, John 1 vv 1-14)

A couple of weeks ago, I was very impressed by a story in the “Times”. I can’t tell you the name of the person it is about. I don’t know what she is called. For reasons that will become plain, she has to use a pseudonym. She calls herself Hannah and she is a young woman living in the Britain we know and love in C21AD. What is shocking about this story is that she has been threatened with death because of her Christian faith.

Hannah was brought up a Moslem. She is the daughter of an imam – a religious leader in the Moslem community. As a young child, she prayed five times a day. She learnt Arabic and had read the Koran by the age of eight. At ten, she donned the hijab, the long robe which protects a Moslem woman’s modesty from lascivious masculine eyes. Islam must have meant a great deal to her. It was the faith of her family and of her friends and of the whole community in which she lived. I do not doubt that she had a real personal faith in Allah, based on prayer and good works, the Koran and the teachings of the mosque.

So what led this devoted follower of the prophet Mohammed to renounce Islam and to embrace Christ? At secondary school, she had become more aware of the world outside Islam and perhaps she had found herself unable to reconcile the teachings of religion with these new experiences and her newfound knowledge.

So far, her story is not too difficult to understand. Many children who are strictly brought up, however lovingly, reject that upbringing in adolescence. Sometimes they return to their childhood faith in later life. Sometimes, after a period of questioning and rejection, they develop a more mature understanding of their parents’ beliefs and way of life. Sometimes such children grow up into lifelong rebels.

It is also true that many children who are enthusiastic members of Christian churches and Sunday Schools when they are young, saying their prayers at home, reading their bibles, taking a full part in public worship, drop out of Church life when they are teenagers. Let me suggest five reasons for this.

- 1) They come under peer pressure not to take part in an uncool minority pursuit like church-going.
- 2) Their lives fill up with schoolwork and exciting leisure opportunities.
- 3) The Church seems to forbid a lot of the things that adolescents would like to do.
- 4) They are too old for the Church’s “children’s activities”, but the rest of the Church’s programme and services are far too old for them.
- 5) They start asking questions which adult Christians can’t or won’t answer or, if they do try to answer them, the teenagers aren’t sufficiently mature to understand where they are going.

For Hannah, however, there was much more and much worse. When she was sixteen, she heard her father on the telephone arranging for her to fly to Pakistan and marry a cousin whom she had never met. Hannah was so shocked by this that she went to college and did not return home. All her friends were friends of her family and Moslems too. So she had nowhere to run to. For a week, she slept in bus shelters until, finally, her religious education teacher offered her a bed. I think we can easily understand that a young woman would want to run away from a forced marriage to someone whom she did not know and also that, knowing that it was her father (who was also her imam) who was arranging all this, that she would not only run away from home, but also run away from the values of her community and the religion which underpinned them. Not only her faith in her family, but also her faith in God would be badly shaken by such an experience. You could perhaps understand if she became an agnostic or even an atheist.

It is not too difficult to find examples of terrible things that religious people have done – all too often supposedly in the name of God – and to join John Lennon in the sentiments of his famous song “Imagine”.

The nineteen sixties secular vision depended on the unspoken premise that religion, patriarchy and patriotism formed an unholy trinity enslaving humanity in ignorance, the enemy of freedom and peace. This vision is still very influential. People even ask for “Imagine” at Christian weddings and funerals! More seriously, this lazy assumption that religion is anti-progressive, a brake on human imagination and freedom, underlies the efforts of some officials, politicians and journalists to exclude religion from public life. Whether we are talking about local councils excluding Jesus, Joseph and Mary from Christmas decorations or the Government compelling church adoption agencies to accept gay couples as potential parents, the agenda is the same. Modern society is post-Christian, secular and multicultural and religion (until it withers away altogether) is to be kept out of the public realm and confined in the heart, the home and the ghetto.

The average secular newspaper columnist would have no problem understanding why a young woman would throw off the religion which took away her childhood, shrouded her in the hijab from the age of ten and attempted to take away her choice to marry whom she chose or, indeed, to choose not to marry at all. The average newspaper columnist would applaud such an act of self emancipation and quite rightly demand that Hannah be protected from any threats that her family or former coreligionists might make.

The difficulty for the average C21 English person in understanding Hannah is what came next. Against the advice of the religious education teacher who took her in, Hannah started to go to church. I wonder why this religious education teacher advised her against going to church. She cannot have been a strict Moslem. If she had been, she would not have supported Hannah against her family in the first place. I guess that this religious education teacher was probably an agnostic or one of those liberal Christians who instinctively recoil from any idea of suggesting that people ought to convert to Christianity, that Jesus has something to offer which is so compelling that it is worth the risk of offending someone by sharing your faith! To be fair to her, however, she might have foreseen what would happen

and have failed to realise that Hannah was ready to run the risks involved because the reward was so great.

This was Hannah's experience of Church. "I watched everyone and saw how they lived their lives. I heard about God's love, about how Jesus died on the cross. I was totally blown away by it. I asked someone how I could get to know Jesus. They said, 'Ask him to come into your life. Ask for forgiveness.' So I did that night and became a Christian."

Hannah kept in touch with her family, but they did not really believe that she meant it when she said that she had become a Christian. However, three years later, Hannah was baptised and now the death threats began. Once, fourteen men with stones and knives turned up at her door and tried to get her to come out. She said, "I pray that one day there will be a reconciliation with my family. But I have no regrets, not one." She also said, "Yes, there is a possibility I will be killed, just as there is for anybody that they can get run over by a bus. My faith means that I am not afraid to die. If I was to focus on that, I would spend my life at home, trapped. I am not going to let it stop me being who I am, from being a Christian." Hannah has had to move house forty five times since her conversion.

What is going on here? It is easy to see why someone in Hannah's position would leave Islam. Any "Guardian" columnist would praise her for wanting to live the life of a normal C21 British young woman. But Hannah didn't do that. She became a Christian. What is more the death threats only started when she converted. It appears that she was left alone by her family and community until she was baptised. So why accept Baptism? Why not leave all religion behind and adopt the lifestyle of any normal modern British young woman? What is so special about Jesus that Hannah is willing to risk her life for her allegiance to Him? Wednesday is the Feast of Stephen and Stephen is generally reckoned to be the first Christian martyr, the first of many. Originally, the word "martyr" just meant witness. The martyrs were people who bore witness of Jesus. But opposition to Christianity was so powerful that being a witness often led to becoming a martyr in the modern sense. Like Hannah, Christians in all ages have only too often found themselves confronted with the choice of renouncing Jesus or suffering a martyr's death. Like Jesus Himself, they yielded up their own lives in the service of God. "Martyr" came to mean a person who sacrifices his life for his faith. Why?

Let's look at the story of Stephen. It takes place in the early days of the Church. Jesus has ascended into Heaven. The disciples have received the Holy Spirit and are busy proclaiming the Gospel. Thousands of people are putting their faith in Jesus and being baptised in His Name. They cannot get enough of worship, prayer and Christian fellowship. They even pool their belongings so that everybody has enough. Then, inevitably as in any human institution, even a Spirit-filled one like the Church, arguments break out. The Greek widows don't think they are getting fair shares with the Hebrew widows. The rowing parties appeal to the apostles for a judgment and the apostles respond that it is unreasonable for them to give up preaching the Gospel in order to wait at table. Seven deacons are to be chosen for this humdrum task and one of those chosen is Stephen. But waiting on tables isn't enough for the deacons either. Stephen just can't help himself. He has to share the excitement of

knowing Jesus with the whole world. However, certain people are vehemently against Jesus and everything He stands for and they turn on Stephen. Eventually, after a long speech in which he explains that Jesus is the fulfilment of everything that God has promised to the world, the crowds stone Stephen to death, leaving their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Shortly afterwards, this same Saul is converted and becomes the apostle Paul, preaching the faith to far more people in far more places than Stephen ever did. You can't keep faith in Jesus down. Both Stephen and Paul were martyrs, along with many others, but the Church just kept on growing. Why? What is so special about faith in Jesus?

I think the answers lie in the story of the Stoning of Stephen. Stephen is described as being full of the Holy Ghost and seeing the glory of God. As Christians, we experience God. We know Him as our Father and friend. When she became a Christian, Hannah was not merely set free from an unpleasant version of Islam and turned loose alone in the world. She entered into a new relationship with the living God. As he died, Stephen cried out, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." Christians are not afraid of death. We know that our experience of God here on earth is both a foretaste and a guarantee of an eternal home in Heaven. Finally, just before he died, and following the example of Jesus, Stephen prayed for the people who were persecuting him, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." True faith in Jesus Christ leads us to behave in ways that are infinitely better than the world expects. If we have faith in Him, we love like Him.

The Christian faith in England has lost much of its power. We Christians became far too conventional and complacent. We lost our power, the power to love even unto death. Now we find ourselves confronted with a militant secularism which would exclude all religion from public life and alien forms of religion whose extremists use intimidation, violence and even death threats to impose their wishes on others and, maybe ultimately, their blueprint on society. The answer is not for us to challenge them with their own weapons of hatred and fear. The answer is the Baby in the manger – vulnerable, self-sacrificial love. Paradoxically, it is this vulnerable love which alone can defeat all the powers of evil. To be a Christian means to dwell in Christ and He in you, to be formed by His Spirit as a son or daughter of God the Father, to experience that love for yourself and to make that love manifest in the world by what you say, what you do and, above all, by what you are. That is what Christmas is all about, He in us and we in Him. If you know this already, Praise the Lord. If you don't, let me give you the advice Hannah's church friends gave her. 'Ask Jesus to come into your life. Ask for forgiveness.' It is a life to die for.