

SERMON: 31 JULY 2016 – REV DR BRENDA ROBSON

Romans 8 : 28 – 39

David Black and Ian Walker have focused over the past three weeks on the evil in the world, the atrocities that have been committed on an increasingly regular basis. This week, another stunning atrocity. The execution of an elderly priest in his church celebrating mass in a small Normandy village.

David Black spoke about Jesus being the light of the world, about the darkness trying to put out that light but the light still shining.

There is a powerful hatred all over the world for different reasons at this time. Jesus came to show God's love, to bring God's message of love and peace. I am going to preach from Romans 8 today. The question – Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? The answer – nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

We sing “Love divine all loves excelling” – “visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart”

The day after the murder of the French priest in his church, a circular went out to all minsters from 121 George Street entitled Counter Terrorism Protective Security Advice. It is 77 pages long – and it is almost totally irrelevant to 99 per cent of churches in Scotland. The advice is impossible, impractical, undesirable.

Chapters are headed – vehicle borne improvised explosive devices, chemical, biological and radiological attacks, suicide attacks, firearm and weapon attacks. We are encouraged to install CCTV everywhere, carry out searches of people and property, be wary of strangers coming into our midst, check rubbish bins for devices, don't allow vehicles next to the church building. Really?

And in 77 pages of advice to protect churches and Christians, the name of God does not appear once and there is no mention of prayer. To be fair, the advice is for synagogues and mosques and other places of worship too. But what this useless document says to me is that the only armour or weapon against the threats of today is prayer. We need to get down on our knees and

declare that our God is sovereign in this world and we trust in him, he is an awesome God!

The French have vowed to protect churches especially at Christmas time – but how?

Persecuted Christians, Christians in danger and under threat – they were always in far away countries, in our prayers but not in our day to day living.

In Scotland today we do not know what it is like to walk past armed guards to enter church or to have the doors locked for safety once we are inside.

A minister recently said **“I am not sure what the most memorable start to a church service may be for you, but for me it is easy to pinpoint. I was preaching to a congregation of Africans. The prayer right at the start by one of the members began like this: “Lord, we thank you that we are here and we are not dead.” For me it was an eye opener to the situations that many of these dear people had come from, situations in which many of their loved ones were still living”**

We have prayed faithfully for the persecuted church but the threat and the challenge has come closer to home.

We could hide away, stop coming to church, play down our faith or even deny our faith. After all, that would be a normal “human” reaction – Peter did it three times when he thought his life might be in danger. Peter, however, denied Jesus three times pre-resurrection. It was a different Peter who face danger post-resurrection and post-Pentecost - who chose death in the end rather than deny Jesus. As did nine others of the chosen 12 disciples.

We too are children of the resurrection.

We are not hide away and to fear. Paul said in his letter to Timothy, God did not give you a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power.

Matthew 6 says **“You are the light of the world....let your light shine before men”**

Some years ago a Church of Scotland minister was murdered at an outdoor service, I think it was Remembrance Sunday. For some time afterwards some ministers discussed not wearing clerical collars in public places, it might be too risky -but interestingly some ministers who did not wear collars started to do so as an act of defiance and principal. Jesus walked around in public places

when his life was in danger, he was provocative and offensive to many, he courted danger in the eyes of his followers. Are we to do anything less?

I conducted a wedding in Livingston on Friday and then popped into the shopping centre still wearing my collar. I find it does attract attention, perhaps moreso being a woman with a collar. People look and then look again. And for the first time on Friday I felt more exposed. I wondered how I would have felt in the city centre or in some parts of Glasgow.

David Black preached over two Sundays about the darkness in the world and our calling to carry Christ's light. We are not to be afraid or silenced or to hide away.

I thought of Esther, when she was faced with the dilemma of whether to speak to the king and try to save her fellow Jews from destruction. She spoke of the danger to her life of approaching the king uninvited. Her relative, Mordecai, who tried to persuade her to act to save her people, said **"If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place but you and your family will perish. And who knows that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"**

This is our time! God is calling us to stand up and be counted.

We were not born to fit in but to stand out.

Now, all I have is now
To be faithful, to be holy and to shine
Lighting up the darkness
Right now, I really have no choice
But to voice the truth to the nations
A generation looking for God
For such a time as this
I was placed upon the earth
To hear the voice of God
And do His will, whatever it is
For such a time as this
For now and all the days He gives
I am here, I am here and I am His
For such a time as this

Jesus has prepared us for this time. He knew what it was to be troubled and distressed and deeply sad. Jesus went through the human anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. And he turned to his heavenly Father in prayer. It is a picture of Jesus that should make us weep. The men and women he loved and came to save were about to betray him and torture him and kill him. We read about the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14 –

Jesus began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” he said to Peter, James and John.....he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible, the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father” he said “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will.”

And after praying for some time longer, he said “Rise! Let us go!”

The Garden of Gethsemane is powerfully depicted in the film *The Passion of the Christ*. I listened to a half hour interview with Jim Caviezel this week, the actor who played Jesus. I had not realised that he was, and still is, such a devout Christian. He felt unworthy of playing Jesus in the film and it had a profound impact on him. He wrestled with whether or not to do it when Mel Gibson asked him. He realised at one point that his initials were JC and he was 33 years old!

Jim glimpsed a little of what Jesus went through. He said “Everybody wants resurrection but not suffering.” He fasted and prayed throughout the filming. During the flogging scene, there was a metal screen protecting his body from the whips but one over-enthusiastic actor missed the screen and opened up a 14 inch gash down his side. All he could think about was his own sinfulness and why would Jesus have endured this for me?

By the time they were filming the crucifixion, Jim was quite ill, he had pneumonia, fluid on his lungs. As he was fixed to the cross and raised up, his left shoulder dislocated several times and so the agony was not acting. He recalled years of being enslaved in sin and at that moment he said he would not have minded dying for Jesus there and then.

The actor who played Judas Iscariot was an atheist at the start of filming and a Christian by the end, as were many of the production crew.

Jim has been an evangelist since making this film and he has spent six years creating the Word of Promise Audio Bible. He said that we as Christians need to set ourselves apart from a corrupt generation.

He said that we might need to choose one day, for Jesus or against him.

There have been many martyrs over the centuries who have died because they would not denounce their faith and deny Jesus. I think we all wonder what we do if we had to choose. We want to think that we would never deny our Lord but we have never had to face that decision.

Corrie Ten Boom is known to most of us. She was a young girl in wartime Holland whose parents hid Jews and her family ended up in a concentration camp. In her book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie describes her fear as a young girl about the future and she asked her father how she would find the strength to face what might come. She wrote -

"Father sat down on the edge of the narrow bed. "Corrie," he began gently, "when you and I go to Amsterdam-when do I give you your ticket?"

I sniffed a few times, considering this.

"Why, just before we get on the train."

"Exactly. And our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things, too. Don't run out ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need-just in time."

We get our ticket when we need it, just in time. From that day on Corrie trusted that God would give her what she needed, just in time.

We need to trust in God. We have Jesus on our side and nothing and no-one can separate us from his love.

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As Jesus left the Garden of Gethsemane to face his enemies he said Rise! Let us go!

As he turned towards the cross, he said Rise! Let us go!

As he prepared to take the sins of the world on his shoulders and to bring about our salvation, he said Rise! Let us go!

Jesus calls us now to rise and to go with him. If Christ is with us, who could be against us?

Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armour on!

But make sure that you put on the right armour. The protective security advice is no protection at all.

The armour we need is found in Ephesians 6: 10 - 18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

And we are back to the comment I made at the beginning, the best armour is prayer.

**And though I walk the darkest path
I will not fear the evil one
For you are with me and your rod and staff
Are the comfort I need to know**

**And I will trust in you alone
For your endless mercy follows me
Your goodness will lead me home**

AMEN