

We wish to see

WEEK 5: LEBANON

Jesus

This week we focus on the Lebanon, where forty per cent of the population is estimated to be Christian, the largest percentage of Christians of all the Middle Eastern nations.



**‘The hour has come for  
the Son of man  
to be glorified’**

This declaration of Jesus is prompted by the request of some Greeks to the Apostle Philip; they wish to see Jesus. We never discover whether their request is granted or indeed what was said. But this seems to point not only to the approaching climax of Jesus’ ministry but it also hints that the Gospel is to be taken beyond the specific land and specific people to the world beyond; that the Gospel would be taken to the Gentiles.

Is this the new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke?

Jesus does not speak as such about a new covenant in this Gospel passage, but he does point us to what a new community will be and what will be its characteristics. There is a sense of foreboding in words of Jesus – this glorification will involve death, and this involvement will bear much fruit. And in this new community people find their lives by losing them. This is a community not

characterised by blood, race, nation or tribal belonging but by following Jesus whose hour had come.

But at the same time Jesus is speaking not of a new religious sect where people separate themselves in exclusive corners, away from the threats and challenges of the world, but will be a community for all people and whose very existence is a challenge to the ways of the world. Jesus’ ‘hour’ marks a judgement on the powers of this world; the community of Jesus – the Church – is called in faithfulness to bear witness to Christ and his judgement.

Often when we think of the Middle East in Christian terms we imagine Palestine, Israel or the cities of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem. But, as we have found throughout this series the Middle East today contains the evidence of that spreading out of the church from its Palestinian beginnings. Here we focus upon Lebanon where we find the largest Christian population in the region. But as in other parts of the Middle East, these are not easy times. With the words of Jesus – concerning the Calvary drama that is to come - in our minds we turn to the Christians in Lebanon today.

## Who are the Christians of Lebanon?

Approximately 40% of the Lebanese population are estimated to be Christians, the largest percentage of Christians of all the Middle Eastern nations. The majority are part of the Maronite Church, which is in communion with the Roman Catholic Church and is very influential politically – the Lebanese constitution says the country's president must be a Christian and this is invariably a Maronite. Other Christian denominations prominent in Lebanon include the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Greek Melkite Catholic Church.

## What's it like being a Christian in that context?

There is a general sense of fear and unrest in Lebanon at the moment. Presidential elections have been postponed leaving the position unfilled since May 2014. The General Election has also been postponed for the second time in less than two years, with Lebanon's legislative body voting overwhelmingly to extend its mandate until 2017 amid fears of rising instability linked to the civil war in neighbouring Syria.

As religious minorities in Iraq and Syria are being persecuted, and the Islamic State (IS) voices its aim to invade all the countries of the region, Christians in Lebanon request prayer for Lebanon and for the safety of its people - including the thousands of refugees sheltering there.

The conflict in Syria has led to over a million refugees fleeing to Lebanon, putting pressure on education, healthcare and other public services. Many Christians are helping Syrians who have often arrived with very few possessions. Sami\* is a lawyer by profession but is currently heading up one aspect of his church's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. He is principal of the church's educational programme for around 300 Syrian children who would not otherwise be in school. Motivated by the love of Christ and supported by one of Embrace the Middle East's partners, this church is also responding to the needs of Syrians by providing food aid to over 700 families, vocational training and basic medical care. It is just one of many churches helping refugees.

A culture of mutual respect and tolerance has developed between Muslims and Christians. Some of the top schools and universities in the country were founded by Protestant missionaries. These schools have attracted

both Muslim and Christian students, which has helped to nurture mutual understanding. For example, the Beirut Baptist School was established over 50 years ago and over 90% of the 1,300 students come from non-Christian families. Parents often attribute their children's strong morals to their education at the school.

\*Name has been changed.

Mount Lebanon



### Questions for discussion

1. What is your response to the story from Lebanon?
2. How do you think the words of Jesus in John's Gospel (12.31) speak to the current situation in the Middle East?
3. Many Christians in the Middle East wish to stress that a continuing and permanent Christian presence in the Middle East is essential for the long term well-being of the region. Do you agree? How can we better support them?

### Prayer

God of justice,  
in our yearning to 'see Jesus'  
we pray that, by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
our eyes might be opened  
that we may see Jesus  
in the faces of our Christian sisters and brothers  
who live in the Middle East,  
and in the faces too of all people,  
yearning for freedom, justice and salvation;  
this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ,  
Amen.