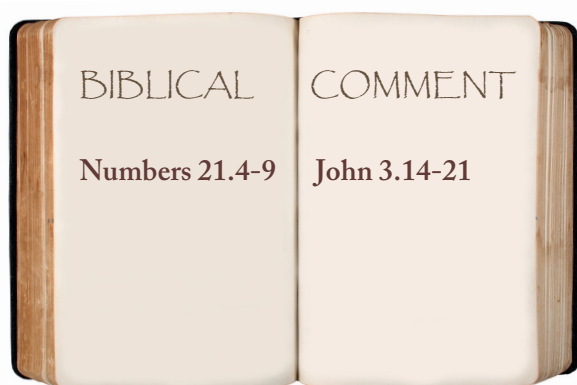


Questioning, rebellion, redemption

WEEK 4: IRAQ

This week we focus on Christians in Iraq.



We began our Lenten journey with a journey into the wilderness. As we reach Week 4 we find the People of God in the desert and in rebellious mood. The long arduous journey had left them impatient. Their hope and dreams seemed to be ebbing away as they despised the food, were thirsty and could only see death looming ahead of them. The Book of Numbers records two separate incidents when the people complain to Moses: the first of these is found in Chapter 14 which also records Moses' own patience with them. But when the sense of despondency returns in Chapter 21 the response is a symbol of reassurance – in the shape of the bronze snake - that so long as they are blessed by God they will be saved and redeemed.

The reference to this incident in John Chapter 3 might well puzzle the Christian reader who might wonder why one of the most memorable phrases in the New Testament is prefaced by the mention of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness! But as we have seen this pointed the Israelites to the faithful promises of God's redemption. Jesus in his conversation with

Warning about external websites!

Reports in the media are telling stories of terrible atrocities that are being inflicted upon Christians in Iraq: should you decide to research this subject further through a search engine such as Google, please exercise extreme caution as some websites contain very graphic imagery. Any external websites that CTBI has links to are not our responsibility but do not, as far as we are aware, contain such imagery.

Nicodemus expands on this point: this faithfulness and, most importantly, this love that God has for the world is such that he gives of his very self. This to save the world and not to condemn it.

Jesus however does not say "God so loved his Chosen People" or even "God so loved the Church", or "God so loved Christians" - his love is for the world without condemnation. In the midst of the unimaginable

suffering that many Christians in Iraq are experiencing today, these are words that offer both reassurance that God in his love will never forsake those who suffer, but also a challenge to us not to respond in hatred or condemnation, but to respond in such a way that reflects the love of God in Christ that sets us free and redeems us.

Who are the Christians of Iraq?

Iraq has some of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Ethnically these are Chaldeans and Assyrians. Prior to the United States led invasion of 2003, the Christian population was estimated to have been between 5 and 8% (just under 2 million). The war and its aftermath has led to a significant exodus of Christians from Iraq, with numbers now as low as 200,000. Chaldaean Catholics are the largest Christian community with significant communities of Syriac Orthodox, other Oriental Orthodox Churches such as the Church of the East and the Assyrian Church of the East. There are also churches of the Armenian Orthodox rite, Melkite Catholic, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox Churches and a small number of Protestant Churches.

For more in-depth information on Christianity in Iraq see the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (<http://frme.org/>).

What's it like being a Christian in Iraq?

For week 4 of the Lenten materials it has not been possible to provide a story of Christianity in Iraq today. The exodus of Christians since the Iraq War from that country into Syria, Jordan and beyond, and the alarming rise of the Islamic State has made it almost impossible for most NGO's to gain access to many parts of Iraq. The media is full of stories of the murder and torture of Christians and the destruction of ancient churches and monasteries. And whilst we should be aware of these atrocities, should we not also balance this with caution in not viewing the extremely violent images on the Internet, which are not only in themselves very upsetting, but the viewing of which also in some way colludes with those who commit such acts.

The story of the city of Mosul offers one perspective of what it is like to be Christian in Iraq. Mosul has for centuries had one of the largest Christian populations in Iraq. The Christians had lived alongside their Muslim neighbours for generations. Mosul contains some of the most ancient churches and mosques, and has been

a centre of religious piety, devotion and learning in the Middle East. In many ways Mosul was the interfaith ideal – people of different faiths living alongside each other with a degree of mutual respect. Yet when the Islamic State invaded the Christians and other minorities became imperilled overnight. Many of them fled after ultimatums of death or conversion; some had no choice but to remain and whose ultimate fate remains uncertain. Ancient churches, monasteries and libraries were destroyed and even Mosques that met with the disapproval of IS were also destroyed.

The late Rabbi Hugo Gryn, who survived Auschwitz, once stated that he didn't want to live in a society where he didn't know his neighbour, suggesting that a society where we truly know and respect one another is one that would prevent such terrible acts of inhumanity. Yet the story of Mosul suggests that in the face of such extreme hatred and violence, basic human neighbourliness might not be enough.

Read the World Council of Churches call for action on behalf of Iraqi Christians
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-calls-for-urgent-action-in-iraq>

Questions for discussion

1. How should the international community respond to the attacks on religious minorities in Iraq (and elsewhere), including Christians?
2. Would it matter to you if there was no Christian presence left in the Middle East?
3. In light of the events in Iraq and the present time, is it possible to respond without condemnation?

Prayer

Redeeming God,
We pray that you will be with your Church
And all who suffer in Iraq at this time.
Be their strength and their hope,
Their comforter and their defender.
May your Spirit guide the nations of the world
To respond with compassion, justice and wisdom,
And be with all who work for reconciliation and peace.
This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen.