

Today's first reading comes from the *Acts of the Apostles*, the story of the early Church in the days and years after the resurrection. The apostles in Jerusalem have chosen seven 'men of good standing' to assist them in the work of preaching and teaching. One of them, Stephen, finds himself in hot water when he is falsely accused of blasphemy. '*We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God*', his opponents say. He is taken before the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin) and asked to give an account of what he has been saying. He then robustly chastises the Jewish leadership for allowing the execution of Jesus, who is the Messiah. The Jewish leaders get very angry and a mob lynching follows. As he is stoned Stephen seeks to copy Jesus by asking for God's forgiveness on his killers. '*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*'.

The second reading today is from 1 Peter. Scholars are divided over the authorship of this letter. Was it written by the Apostle Peter or has it been ascribed to him to give the letter some authority, a not uncommon practice in the ancient world. The letter is beautifully written and is somewhat understated in the New Testament.

The author is writing to Christians found in various towns in Asia Minor (today's Turkey). The background is persecution. Christians in Asia Minor are in the midst of 'all kinds of trials' (1.6); they are likely to be slandered as evil-doers (3.26); a fiery ordeal will soon test them (4.12); they will suffer for doing what is right (3.14). These Christians share in the sufferings of fellow-Christians in other places and the author calls on them to endure, to be faithful, to hold fast to the faith.

So a theme in this Sunday's readings is courage.

Around the world today Christians continue to buckle on courage in face of persecution.

- We think of the former Governor of Jakarta, Arok. He had been seeking re-election, when he was charged with blasphemy (just as Stephen had been) because he said that some of his opponents were using a small verse in the Koran to persuade citizens not to vote for him. The verse said that all infidels were liars and he disagreed with that. Commentators say that the charge was politically motivated and a key factor in his election loss. Prosecutors asked for a suspended sentence, but that did not stop the judges sentencing him to two years imprisonment. Commentators again say that the judges may have felt intimidated by the presence in the court room of a number of hard line Islamic people. Arok is spending today in prison.
- Or think of members of the Coptic Church in Egypt. Two churches were bombed on Palm Sunday and 47 people were killed. ISIS claimed responsibility. The Coptic Christians are routinely targeted. I can recall walking in a protest march in Brisbane five or six years ago alongside Copts who lived here, when there had been another spate of killings and bombings of Coptic Christians. One of them told me then that

the killing of Coptic Christians go largely investigated because it is Christians who have died.

- Or the girls, now young women who were kidnapped several years ago by Boko Haram in Nigeria.
- Or Christians in the Middle East. There are fewer and fewer Christians in Syria, where being Christian is increasingly dangerous. And over the decades fewer and fewer in Israel/Palestine.

So Copts, Indonesian Christians, Christians in Africa and the Middle East and elsewhere will resonate with the Easter readings we have today, which call on them to stand fast, to endure, to be faithful in midst of ongoing persecution. To buckle on courage.

And do we need courage too? Yes, but in a different way.

I recently heard someone talks of five expressions of courage that might be required of anyone in Australia.

- *The courage to be different.* Not always to conform. It certainly takes courage to commend your faith in Australia, when many think you must be balmy to take it seriously.
- *The courage to go on loving.* Some find themselves in situations where it is difficult to go on wanting the best for another who they just don't get on with: a difficult colleague at work perhaps or someone in a social group or even among ones family.
- *The courage to endure,* to persevere. Christians these days need resilience. There are few social supports for the practice of a Christian lifestyle and so Christians need a certain resilience, a capacity to go on even when the going is tough or dry.
- *The courage to do what is right.* We live in a pragmatic society, that is, one where people do what is convenient. Christians are called to do what is right and principled.
- *The courage to be faithful* to Christ, and in basics of Christian life. We need to try and echo God's faithfulness. God is faithful to us: he is steady in purpose (our salvation) and steadfast in love. God does not blow hot and cold. In a similar way we are called to be steady in purpose (to follow Jesus) and steadfast in love. Our faithfulness becomes an echo of God's faithfulness to humanity.

It takes a certain courage to be Christian in Australia. There are no longer the social supports for faith, so faith has to be deliberately and consciously fostered. It takes courage to prioritise Sunday mornings for worship, when others might expect you to be available for other social or family activities, and cannot understand why you would choose 'church' over something they think must be more 'relaxing and enjoyable'. It takes courage to give a

natural and easy reason for your faith in Christ, when to speak of your faith would make others think you are really odd.

There is a prayer at the end of the Eucharist. *'Most loving God, you send us into world you love. Give us grace to go thankfully and with courage, in power of your Spirit.* As we say it today, perhaps we can say a silent prayer for all Christians around world who need to buckle on courage – that the Holy Spirit will help the Copts, and former Governor Arok and other Indonesia Christians, and Syrian Christians, and Christians in Africa and many, many others, to find the courage to go on being faithful and to endure in the face of persecution; and for the Holy Spirit to help us too in our need for courage: that we might be given the courage by the Holy Spirit to be different, to go on loving, to persevere, to do what is right, and, above all, to go on being faithful to Christ.

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