

## Sermon – St Faith and Persecution

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2016

On Thursday this week it was the feast day of our own patron, St Faith. Although we know very little about St Faith we do know that she was martyred during the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire, because she refused to offer pagan sacrifices even when she was placed under torture.

Often when we remember saints and martyrs it is easy to think of their situation as the past. The persecution of Christians is not only a historical event but a present reality in the world today. We are all familiar with recent news headlines about death and destruction caused by one religion or another. Sometimes we include places like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in our intercessions. I wonder if we know or remember that Christians in places such as Malaysia, Tunisia, China, Mexico and the Maldives are also facing persecution today.

The charity Open Doors who dedicate their time to offering support to persecuted Christians around the world published some stark statistics recently:

Each month

322 Christians are killed for their faith

214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed

And 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians.

100 million Christians around the world are suffering and they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are paying a heavy price for their faith, beatings, physical and mental torture, isolation, rape, discrimination and like St Faith even death.

Yet somehow these Christians stand strong, despite the many obstacles they face. St Faith in the face of her persecutors is said to have declared “I am prepared to suffer everything for Christ.” I wonder what we can learn from her faith and the faith of our persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world.

There is something about hardship that allows them to know God more deeply. When times get really tough, they discover more about who God is and how He works. Their faith is so strong that they ask not for prayers to end their persecution but for strength to stand strong in its face. I wonder how many of us can in the face of our own struggles and adversities pray for strength rather than a solution.

In the New Testament reading we have heard this morning we are reminded of the persecution that Paul endured for his faith. He wants Timothy to know that he too may suffer for his faith as well. Paul reminds him and us that the gospel cannot be bound, our faith cannot be bound. We must continue to hold strong to the gospel message and our faith in Christ Jesus. The gospel proclamation that Christ has been resurrected is the blinding truth, the word of God. The power of Christ’s resurrection so enables Paul that nothing deters him from his mission to speak the truth of the redeeming love of Christ.

So what might all of this mean to us here in Havant? Whilst we are not facing the persecution that St Faith and Paul suffered, there may still be times when we are suffering for our faith. In work places, in the street, with our friends and family. Are we being constrained by other people’s lack of belief, do we shy away from our gospel values, denying Christ, because we don’t have the confidence to challenge the views of others?

We must remember Christ, who died and was resurrected, he gave his life to free us from oppression, and he is with us always to strengthen and encourage us. Let St Faith remind us to pray for our brothers and sisters suffering persecution around the world. So that we can stand strong together in faith. Let St Faith remind us to stand strong in Havant, to proclaim the gospel in all we do.

Amen.