

Bennochy church 29th October 2017

" Sooner or later, everyone should be arrested and imprisoned for a good cause. Or if not arrested and imprisoned, put in a position of suffering and sacrifice. Or if not that, at least be criticised or inconvenienced a little. Because if we're co-conspirators with the Spirit of God to bring blessing to our world, sooner or later it's going to cost us something and get us into trouble.

Jesus told his followers to 'count the cost'. He promised that those who walk his road would experience push—back, even persecution. " (Brian McLaren, *We make the road by walking*, p.294)

"... everyone should be arrested and imprisoned for a good cause..." Have you ever imagined yourself in a situation, where under interrogation, you have a choice, stay silent and face the consequences or give in, to protect yourself or your family. For many people in occupied countries, that was a war time experience. An almost impossible choice to make. Think of the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was executed on June 9, 1945, hanged for his role in the conspiracy to overthrow the regime, just two weeks before soldiers from the United States liberated the concentration camp in which he was held. Bonhoeffer staunchly opposed Hitler's treatment of the Jews. As a Christian pastor he could not sit idly by and watch the murder of so many men and women.

I don't think any of us, until placed in such a situation, would actually know how we would respond. Maybe we should not be too hard on such people who under the most extreme pressure, did give in. In times of peace, brave words are easy. As part of the church today, how we have responded to issues of say, injustice in the world or climate change. Have we raised our heads above the parapet? And remember, there were many in the church who supported the rise of Hitler in Germany and apartheid in South Africa.

Even during the time of the Reformation in 16th century Europe, this year celebrating its 500th anniversary, heretics', in the eyes of others, were burned at the stake. The reformation, all began with Martin Luther, a catholic priest, who in 1517, possibly, nailed his 95 thesis on the door of All Saints church in Wittenberg, against the excesses and corruption of the church. The first Scottish martyr was Patrick Hamilton, slowly burnt to death in St Andrews in 1528. Not a pleasant way to go!

Religious claims have been, and still are, the source of much violence in the world. Much of the history of the church, is not one to be proud of.

The early church were under a constant threat of violence and imprisonment from the Roman empire and the Jewish authorities. Christians found themselves in the arena facing certain death. There was the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter seven, watched on and approved by, a man named Saul. Later

he would be Paul, the great Christian missionary. In our story, Peter and John were actually imprisoned by the Jewish authorities, because they were teaching that Jesus had risen from death and for healing a lame man. I had a slight chuckle to myself when I read this passage, it says, they were annoyed! It seems they might have been a bit more than just annoyed!

The authorities had a problem here. The miracle had been witnessed, so could not be denied. So they tried to limit the damage and warned Peter and Paul never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Note the response of the apostles and wonder how their statement applies to the life and witness of the church today. *"But Peter and John answered them, "You yourselves judge which is right in God's sight—to obey you or to obey God. For we cannot stop speaking of what we ourselves have seen and heard." (acts 4: 19-20)*

How do you assess society today in its response to God and the gospel of Jesus Christ? Tolerant. Apathetic. Hostile? I suspect its response will depend on what we say and how we act. What Brian McLaren talks about as, 'push back'. In 16th century Europe the push back was known as the 'counter reformation' and violence and warfare that went with it. The challenge to reformation Europe, and their religious authorities was as great a challenge, as the challenge to 1st century Jewish leaders, from the early church.

The challenge to us is this; are we willing to take the spiritual bruises for what we believe! In the challenge that the church faces in 21st Scotland, I believe another '*reformation*' is required. The status quo is no longer an option and has not been for a long time. Let me be blunt. The Church of Scotland changes, or the Church of Scotland dies. Look around and see the future! The 500th anniversary of the Church of Scotland will take place in 2060. We might not be around to witness that historic date, but the question is, will this denomination still exist, or will we by then, just be history?

After Peter and Paul were released, we are told that the believers prayed for boldness. Are we prepared as a church to be bold and create a 'push back'. A response to our witness. At least to be criticised or inconvenienced.

Jesus described the pilgrim journey using the image of a cross. He said, pick up your cross and follow me. He had already picked up his cross and asks us to do the same. This is where the rubber hits the shoulder! Stay silent, or take the strain of our faith. To us, Jesus promise is this, carry the cross and I will carry it with you. The burden, the push back, will not, be ours alone. Amen.