

Vicar's Letter - November

Will you decide to follow Jesus?

Dear friends

In the last few days you may have heard on the news that the case against Asia Bibi, the Pakistani Christian lady and mother of 4 children has been acquitted by the Supreme Court on appeal. She had been charged under the blasphemy laws for making offensive comments about the Prophet Muhammad and was awaiting execution (death by hanging) on charges which she always consistently denied. The judges of the Supreme Court said the case was built on flimsy evidence and that the prosecution had 'failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt'. This ruling has sparked a storm of protests in Pakistan further threatening the minority Christian community who already feel vulnerable to threats of persecution and intimidation. Since 1990 at least 65 people have reportedly been killed by 'hardliners' over claims of blasphemy.

We need to pray for Asia Bibi and the Christian community in Pakistan who have been targeted by numerous attacks in recent years. For Asia Bibi the cost of following Jesus has meant 8 years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement. We cannot begin to imagine the depth of personal suffering this has caused her.

Making a decision

Asia Bibi is by no means the only Christian who is being persecuted for following Jesus. You only have to look at some of the web sites such as Release International, Open Doors etc. to discover the difficult climate in which so many Christians live in countries where they are a small minority. It reminds us who live in a country where we are free to express our faith how fortunate we are. It also compels us to support our brothers and sisters in prayer, finance and to campaign for their basic human rights.

Following Jesus is not an easy decision for many around the world and that decision needs to be taken with an awareness of the cost.

'If anyone would come after me' Jesus said, 'let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it'(Mark 8:34,35).

Baptism – the mark of decision

As we know, for many who come to Jesus and decide to follow him, the decision to be baptised sets a seal upon them.

- First of all it is a seal of obedience to what Jesus tells his followers to do:

'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' (Matthew 28:19,20)

- Secondly it is a seal of witness to the life death and resurrection of Christ. It states publicly a person's decision to live (and if necessary die) for Jesus.

'Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life' (Romans 6:4)

- Thirdly it is a seal of ownership over us. By being marked on our foreheads with the sign of the cross it places a seal on the decision which means we now belong to Christ and resolve to live for him alone.

Baptism Sunday 25th November

Whenever we have adults or young people coming forward to publicly state their faith in Jesus we stand together with our persecuted brothers and sisters undertaking the same act of commitment. For many of them who have converted from another religion, this act of decision makes them vulnerable to being killed for their faith sometimes by family members who see it as their religious duty. Therefore, any decision to follow Jesus should not be undertaken lightly or casually. And yet with that decision comes the glorious promises of God: forgiveness of sins; his presence constantly with us; his purpose worked out in and through our lives; our eternal home secure in Him for this life and beyond and so much more.

Please pray for those who are making a public decision for Jesus at our service in a few weeks time and who will be baptised by full immersion, that their decision may be whole hearted and life long.

Stephen