

The way in which the faith attracts persecution is one of the mysteries. We can tell from the history-books how it happened. There was of course misunderstanding; people have been persecuted because people heard snatches of Christian theology, and came away convinced that the Eucharist was a cannibalistic feast. There is scapegoating: it is said that the emperor Nero wanted a whole quarter of Rome clearing to build his Golden House on it, so he laid fires in all parts, and burnt it down, with great - and fully intentional - loss of life. When the survivors turned on him he blamed the secret society called the Christians, and many perished in the Circus, including (it is said) St Peter.

But there's something altogether more serious than that behind this persecution. We would not honour people as martyrs who had died through a misunderstanding. Beneath all such surface realities, there is something in Christianity that is deeply subversive to the accustomed way in which the world solves its problems. Christians stand solidly against the exploitation of individuals and the automatic sanctioning of power possessed. We are committed to the cause of justice, even if to do right means costly sacrifice and great loss. We live in the presence of a just God, and may not keep silence when his will is ignored. In this way we are programmed to be at odds with those who live differently. In cases like this, we can say that we have attracted enmity exactly as Jesus did, when he called his fellow-Jews to believe in the gospel. We are baptised into the Kingdom of Heaven, and are not subject to other rules except in deference to God.

If the persecutor's religion seems to sanction the tormenting of Christians - and let us not forget the Inquisitions or the Crusades - then the picture is complete; for Jesus was condemned in the name of the God of Israel, for blasphemy. There must be no lonelier place than the place of execution, when it is overseen by a Christian Bishop and a Christian King. There are Protestant saints who died like that; and there are Catholic ones too, including Joan of Arc, who died a Catholic, watched by the Catholic Bishop of Beauvais, within sight of the Cathedral of Rouen. To canonise her in 1920 was not a belated consolation prize for the Maid of Orleans. It was a warning to us that the Gospel can be persecuted, even within the Church itself. For the third time Jesus warns us:

*I am telling you all this,
so that when the time for it comes,
you may remember that I told you.*