

The crisis in Middle East – a Christian dilemma

In the ongoing crisis in the Middle East it is indisputable that the ancient Christian communities are under increasing pressure. This has resulted in a slow but steady exodus of Christians from countries such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the original home of the Faith, the Holy Land itself.

There is a certain irony in that often attacks on and persecution of Christians who have had a presence in places almost from the time of Christ¹ have been exacerbated, caused even, by Western political and military action. This is probably best epitomised by the second Iraq War and the invasion of that country in March 2003 to put an end to the regime of the then dictator Saddam Hussein. There is no need to rehearse the tragic consequences of what history will surely judge as an ill-thought-through foreign adventure without a clear post war strategy which in turn unleashed militant jihadist forces in a complex unravelling of the barely understood tensions between the Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam. The resultant mayhem across countries and borders has left Christians as suspected supporters of, or colluders with, what is seen as the Western and Christian aggressor.

We stand on the cusp of yet another terrifying possible intervention with unknown ramifications, this time in Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons. These, unhelpfully described weapons of mass destruction, it seems (although this is not certain) have been used by the still technically governing Ba'ath Party regime.

However, simply to weaken or destroy the Alawite Shia government will not necessarily bring peace or a satisfactory outcome as the so-called rebel groups are not a unified force of pro-democracy fighters. Rather they represent a motley alliance of different groups under the generic heading 'Syrian National Coalition' from the Al Qaeda militant movement, to The Muslim Brotherhood, to nationalists and social democrats. The only commonality seems to be that the 'opposition' are Sunni in background, hence once again a Sunni/Shi'a conflict. The regime and the rebels each have the capacity to bomb maim and fight. In this respect Christians are effectively protected by the Assad regime and fear any alternative. In short Western observers need to note that there are no straightforwardly 'goodies or baddies' with which to align or take sides.

In this context it might be worth looking at a biblical precedent from the distant past. The one that immediately springs to mind is that of the Herodian dynasty. Founded in 37 BCE by Herod the Great (died 4 BCE) it runs as a tyrannical thread through the Christian New Testament, finally finishing with the death of Herod's grandson Agrippa II in 93 CE.

¹ Some of these communities are so old that they use the Aramaic of Jesus' time in their liturgies.

Indisputably the dynasty was hated by most of the Jews it governed and was always ready to exercise power in a brutal fashion. The description of Herod's massacre of the innocents as portrayed in the Matthean biblical narrative² is perfectly plausible. Even if there are problems with Matthew's grasp of dating, it is typical of what Herod would have done. Yet at the same time, with a good working relationship with the Roman overlords³ Herod kept the peace and the Romans off the Jewish people as well as rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, which was considered to be one of the world's wonders. Later nationalistic uprisings eventually led to the destruction of both the Temple and Jerusalem itself by the Romans in 70 CE.

I offer this biblical reminder not to make a case for the unquestioning support of tyrannical regimes but rather as a salutary reminder of the difficulties and complexities associated with military action in today's Middle East. Thankfully, as this is written diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria seem to be coming into the ascendancy.

In the meantime there is a further irony that it is only the breakaway and schismatic Anglican Church in North America that has flagged the perilous situation for the ancient Christian Churches of the area⁴. The voice from the Anglican Communion in contrast seems sadly muted.

Nicholas Henderson
10th September 2013

² See Matthew 2 vv16-18

³ Herod Agrippa, Herod the Great's son was educated and friends with Caligula and Nero

⁴ See: <http://www.anglicanchurch.net/?/main/page/654> (accessed September 2013)