Stowe Parish Church – Nov. 6th 2022

Good morning. Thank you to Andrew for the opportunity to speak about Open Doors. I’m a volunteer speaker and was last here pre-lockdown. Thank you for your support both financial and in prayer. At this point I usually show the Top Ten video. So I will just talk you through that instead. India is 10, Hindu extremists want to rid India of Christians and other minorities.

9 is Iran, where Christians are often arrested for crimes against ‘national security’, 8 is Pakistan where you are a second class citizen if you are a Christian.7 is Nigeria which has risen massively since 3 years ago, the country where you are most likely to be killed for your faith.

6 is Eritrea, where more than 1000 Christians are imprisoned for their faith , Yemen is 5 where it is very tribal and Christians are hugely vulnerable to persecution.

4 is Libya where you cannot tell anyone about Jesus safely.. it’s a very dangerous place.

3 is Somalia where Islamic extremists target Christians to kill them.

2 is North Korea where Christians can only worship in secret and around 70 000 are believed to be locked up in labour camps and prisons for their faith.

1 is Afghanistan where you have to keep your faith hidden with the Taliban hunting out Christians.

Some of you may be aware that Brother Andrew passed away, on the 25th September I believe, the day after Standing strong, the Open Doors event in Nottingham. It is sad in many ways, but what an amazing legacy he leaves.. The original Bible smuggler in 1955, starting in Poland and continuing across the iron curtain.. and then to China in 1967. Later, Brother Andrew met leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad amongst other leaders.. he commanded such respect globally. Now in glory, we thank God for him and the work he started all those years ago.

There are now 360 million Christians under high levels of persecution. The trend is upwards. For the first time in 20 years, Afghanistan has overtaken North Korea as the most dangerous place to be a follower of Jesus. This is entirely due to the fall of Afghan. to the Taliban. North Korea has not gone down in any way in terms of scoring points for persecution, in fact a new anti-reactionary thought law in North Korea has led to more arrests, and more closure of churches. But Afghanistan has overtaken it due to the number of deaths and the danger for believers. The withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan has had a direct impact on Islamist terror groups around the world according to Open Doors. They have become emboldened by what has happened in Afghanistan, and the region directly around the country has become more dangerous too.

China has used facial recognition technology to persecute Christians and other minorities for some time but this use of technology to control is spreading to countries like Myanmar, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Across sub-Saharan Africa, violence from Islamist terror groups is spreading.

But perhaps most worrying of all this year is not just a rise in the violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief, but the increasing absence of any regard for human rights at all. Governments are becoming more totalitarian, using technology to oppress Christians and other minorities. A bit of good news On 3 November 2021 Iran’s Supreme Court decided that belonging to a house church does not make Christians ‘enemies of the state’. This ruling was good for Christians leading to hope that house churches would be freer to worship.

Nigeria, which is the country where you are most likely to be killed for your Christian faith. It has risen to number 7 on the world watch list from 11 last year and 12 the previous year.

This is due to 4 different groups being able to attack with impunity it seems. Boko Haram militants attack Christians and abduct women and children, as in Chibok in 20. And Dapchi in 2018. Leah Sharibu was taken prisoner in 2018 and is still in captivity due to her refusal to renounce her Christian faith. All the other kidnapped girls were released. She has been seen by others who have had contact or been released themselves but we continue to pray for her release and to lift her family before God.

ISWAP, Islamic state west African province are also active and are more brutal in their tactics. They work together with Boko Haram, then there are the Fulani militants who attack and kill Christians because they want their land and cattle.. and finally armed bandits who have hit the news more recently and demand ransom for their hostages.

These groups work together sadly and often succeed in massive destruction due to not being captured and brought to justice. So the cycle continues.

On Pentecost Sunday in Owo in Ondo state attackers went into church killing children as well as adults. The priest and some others were abducted. A lawmaker in Ondo believes that Fulani militants were behind the attack but the BBC website suggests it could be a militant group linked to ISWAP. Between 40 and 50 people were killed.

The south of Nigeria is known for being peaceful for Christians that this shows that things are changing. The violence has so far been in the North and Middle Belt but is now spreading. Zula is Open Doors contact for Nigeria and he says that the spread of the violence from the north and middle belt is the result of violence that has gone unpunished.

In May, the head of the Methodist church in Nigeria was abducted along with 2 other priests in the south east, later released after a ransom was paid.

A statement from Jo Newhouse, Open Doors’ spokesperson for sub-Saharan Africa said “We condemn in the strongest terms possible the attack on Christians as they gathered in peace to worship God,” We call on the Nigerian government to adequately discharge its legal obligation of duty to protect its citizens, both under international and domestic legal regimes.

“We also call upon the authorities to take a strong stance against all violence, including Fulani militant violence, investigate the perpetrators, hold them accountable to the justice system and break the cycle of violence that is expanding to other areas of the country, as is clearly shown by this incident. The longer these acts go unpunished, the longer they will continue.”

Bishop Wilfred of Benue state issued a statement on 20th May asking why the Nigerian government remained silent and also decrying the silence of the international community to the suffering church in Nigeria.

‘Sometimes it appears we have been abandoned to the mercy of the jihadists’. He particularly is concerned about the agenda of Islamist extremists to wipe out all Christian belief in Nigeria.

Open Doors run a trauma centre in the country which helps victims of attacks to get back on their feet again.. the work is going really well, and Tirham, spoke at Standing Strong a few years ago, Tirham works for the trauma centre. There are moves to set up another centre in Burkina Faso where there is a need for such a facility as the violence spreads over the border.

Turning to the Middle East. It’s been 6 years since the Hope for the Middle East campaign was launched to literally keep hope alive by providing emergency help to the church which was in danger of disappearing. This has happened through the establishment of Centres of Hope in Syria and Iraq with 160 now open in Syria, and 126 in Iraq with more planned. This is a fantastic answer to prayer and also is due to supporters faithful giving over the last few years. These Centres of Hope are places where the local church can support their community in a practical way. This could include providing food and medical aid, and also Bible study and training in discipleship. But not least, micro-loans have been given to start many people off who had lost their job and were unable to support their families, and also trauma care.(often church buildings) where the local church can support their community practically and spiritually.

I was at Standing strong in September, Open Doors annual event for supporters. We heard from Bishop Daniel, formerly, Father and Brother Daniel who you have probably seen on the website. He talked of how there were 1.5 million Christians post 2003, in Iraq, today that number is just 150 000. 90% have left. Many have been targeted, killed and generally treated as second class citizens. In 2006, his family received a threat from Al Quaeda, you have to leave within 24 hours or you will be killed. It was Bishop Daniel’s 16th birthday. He received no gifts, just a bullet wrapped in paper and dipped in blood. He was in tears. What an awful birthday.. The family left and went North to Erbil.

2012 found Daniel back in Erbil having trained to be a Priest. In 2014, Isis came to the Ninevah plain, where Christians lived. 120 000 people left. Daniel was reminded of his family leaving in 2006.

The church bells rang out in Quaraqosh to warn the Christians to leave. When people came to Erbil, 1600 sheltered at his church. 300 or so children. Most stayed in the church. No services held for 2 weeks so that we did not have to disturb them. The church provided food and water each day, 3000 bottles of water a day! It was hard for people used to fending for themselves to have to queue up for food. They cried. Open Doors helped and the community responded. They opened a trauma healing centre.

God is turning evil into good. Many of those people in church went on to become pastors. Daniel experienced burn-out from listening to people’s traumas. The children were fighting, draw your dreams in art therapy classes. They drew pictures of themselves as soldiers, killing the enemy. 6 months on, other dreams and occupations began to feature. One girl drew a picture of herself as Britney Spears! Bishop Daniel said he prayed, Lord have mercy! Trauma Healing Centre. It is very hard to be a Christian today in Iraq, he said. You are a target for terrorists, and your properties could be seized by militia. There is a direct correlation between what happens in the West and what happens in Iraq. Iraq got bombed because of the western cartoons of the prophet. 5 or 6 churches got bombed the day after western sources criticised Islam.

Before 2014 the churches in Iraq were not united. During the displacement and persecution they put aside their doctrinal differences. This is a wake-up call to churches in the West, Bishop Daniel said. Do not be separated, be united. Isis caused destruction, but they cannot steal Jesus who lives in our hearts. We will forget Al Quaeda and Isis but we will not forget you who supported us. If God is for us, who can be against us?

We’ve heard about Nigeria and the ongoing security situation there for our family, we’ve heard about Bishop Daniel in Iraq. How does that apply to us?

I’m reading a book on Exodus by Alec Motyer. He talks of the children of Israel leaving Egypt. God brought them out of slavery in a dramatic way. They went through the Red Sea pursued by the Egyptians.. where did God lead them? To the wilderness. He led them there. In the same way, we have been set free by Christ.. but we are not promised an easy time. God leads us into the wilderness too. Jesus said, He that would follow me, let him deny himself, take up his CROSS and follow me.’ We experience trials in order to learn obedience. But also to prove our faith to be genuine. In 1 Peter 1 Peter writes about how the Early Church was sharing in Christ’s suffering. There was a sense of expecting to be tested because of loyalty to Jesus. But Peter goes on to say ‘In this you greatly rejoice, though not for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials so that the genuineness of your faith may redound to praise .. at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ Verse 6 It seems strange to rejoice when you are suffering, but the hardships are temporary, in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul talks of these light and momentary afflictions and how they are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (v 17-18) As we read, the testing of our faith is to show that it is real! What good is faith if you go under at the first hurdle?

To try and draw things together.. we observe great faith in the suffering church of Nigeria, and Syria. We take encouragement from them, but also let us be encouraged to pray for them daily.. because they and we are in a great spiritual battle.. our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, authorities and powers of the this dark age and against the spiritual forces in the heavenly realms… Ephesians 6 v 13 At Standing Strong, we were reminded of the direct link between our prayers in the free world and our persecuted family. Bishop Daniel said there are 2 armies who are fighting for them.. the heavenly army and the earthly army which is us.. our prayers are the weapons which are used by God, for our brothers and sisters who desperately, desperately need them. Let us undertake to pray and keep on praying daily for them.

Let us be encouraged to stay close to the Lord as we make our pilgrimage through this world and to shine a light for Jesus as we go, like Bishop Daniel and the others in Erbil.

If you would like to sign up for prayer emails, which are a great way to connect with the persecuted church, I have forms, (HOLD UP Sign up FORM)and you get a free copy of God’s smuggler when you do so. I have 2 copies with me. (Hold up God’s Smuggler)

If you feel moved to give, you can give directly to opendoorsuk.org or see me, I have copies of the Top 50 World Watch List which is a very good read and helpful to direct your prayer. (Hold up WWL)

Thank you for listening and may I pray.

Lord God, we thank you that you walk beside us through the wilderness. We thank you for the amazing faith of the church undergoing trials. We pray that you would supply the needs of the church in Iraq and we pray for strength for the church in Nigeria. We give you thanks for the freedom which we have in the UK and ask that we never take this for granted. We pray that you will help us to commit to pray for those who suffer for their faith. Finally we thank you for Jesus who gave up his life for us and who will come again one day in glory when all wars and persecution will come to an end. Amen