

Counting the Cost: Polycarp

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 21st February 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (first in a series of 5 sermons on *Heroes of the Faith: Counting the Cost*)

Readings: Revelation 2:8-11, Mark 8:31-38

Introduction

Last week we looked at the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, an event that gave his three closest disciples a glimpse of his glory. It was also for Jesus a turning point, as he began to teach his disciples that he would suffer and die. Only a few days earlier Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, and Jesus had immediately spoken not only of his forthcoming death, but also of the cost of following him.

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34-35 NRSV)

Every year I take my car for its annual MOT and service. It's important to do some regular maintenance on a car so that it can be fit for its purpose of transporting you around. Similarly, Lent is a time for self-examination and for a bit of spiritual maintenance. When Jesus talked about denying yourself, he was not talking about giving up chocolate or alcohol. He meant that if we want to follow him, we need to put him and his message first in our lives, above our own pleasure and convenience. There is a cost to following him – but the reward is to find the true meaning of your life and to be with him for eternity.

Twice a year in this country, at the New Year Honours and at the Queen's Birthday Honours, awards are given to people who have made notable achievements, or who have served their community or their country and made a positive difference. There are also awards for gallantry, which is defined as conspicuous acts of courage, often at personal risk, to save others. Gallantry awards are the only ones which can be awarded after someone's death.

In the same way, Christians honour those who have been conspicuous examples of living out their faith, putting the needs of others first, and staying faithful to their beliefs even if faced with persecution or death. Whether or not they have been officially recognised by the Pope, these are men, women and even children whose life marks them out as saints – people who were wholeheartedly dedicated to God and to serving others. Over the next 5 weeks we will be honouring some of these heroes of the faith in our sermon series *Counting the Cost*. But as we hear their stories, we need to remember that each of them experienced times of fear, self-doubt, uncertainty and failure. What got them through was their sense of *purpose* – fulfilling their part in God's plan – *perseverance* in spite of affliction or setbacks,

trust in the *promises* of God, and a *personal experience* of God in their lives. (You may recognise my four points from last week!)

While we need to remember that God accepts us as we are, and we don't need to prove anything to him, it is also true that to fulfil our potential as followers of Jesus we sometimes need to challenge ourselves, and raise the bar. So I hope that exploring what God did through the people we are going to hear about this Lent will challenge us to strive towards new heights of kindness, generosity and self-sacrifice. In addition to people who have become famous, there have always been many unsung heroes who have served God and others just as faithfully. May we be counted among them.

Polycarp

Our hero of faith this week is Polycarp, who was bishop of Smyrna, now Izmir on the western coast of modern Turkey. We know from later Christian writers that Polycarp met some of the people who had personally known Jesus in his life on earth. Irenaeus, who was writing in the second half of the second century AD, says that the apostle John appointed Polycarp as Bishop of Smyrna. We have quite a lot of information about Polycarp, including a letter he wrote to the church in Philippi,¹ which is a fascinating document which is modelled on the letters of Paul and John, and indeed quotes from them and from Gospel texts. From an academic point of view he is a fascinating link with the apostolic age, and shows the continuity of Christian teaching.

Do you remember that Philip the Evangelist (the one who evangelised the Ethiopian Eunuch)? Acts tells us that he had four daughters who were prophets. Well, Polycarp met two or three of them too.

But what Polycarp is most remembered for is his martyrdom. When Jesus talked about taking up your cross, he knew that for some of his followers this was going to mean being willing to die for their faith. And what was true for Polycarp and many thousands of Christians in the days of the Roman Empire is also true today. Today hundreds of thousands of Christians are persecuted for their faith, either by their governments, as in China, North Korea or Iran, or by the communities in which they live, such as in Pakistan, India or Indonesia. Many are put under pressure to renounce their Christian faith, and are imprisoned and executed, or killed by mob violence or jihadist armed militias. It's also true that people of other faiths experience the same things, and we are particularly aware at the moment of the mass imprisonment and indoctrination that the Chinese government are inflicting on the Uighar people and other minorities in their so-called "colleges of further education" in Xing Jiang province.

Why does this happen? Perhaps we can learn something from the story of Polycarp and the early Church.

¹ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/polycarp-lake.html>

Christianity spread quickly through the Roman Empire in the years after the resurrection of Jesus in 30 or 33 AD. When St Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in around 56 AD, there was already a church in the capital of the Empire. Within a few decades there were churches in all the major cities in modern Turkey and Greece, including the 7 churches in western Turkey (or Anatolia) to which the book of Revelation was sent. By that time there was official persecution by the Roman State, which was the reason for the message we heard to the church in Smyrna:

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev 2:10 NRSV)

As I was thinking about the message of this sermon, I asked myself why the Roman State wanted to persecute Christians? After all, there were many different faiths and religions in the Empire. In addition to the pantheon of gods which the Romans and Greeks worshipped, there was the cult of Mithras and the worship of Egyptian gods. Judaism in the first century had a protected status. So why not accept one more faith in the form of Christianity?

An important clue can be found in the correspondence between the writer Pliny the Younger and the Emperor Trajan, which was written about 111 AD. Pliny had just been made Governor of the province of Bythnia-Pontus in northern Turkey, and he wrote to Trajan for advice in how to deal with Christians, as he had not had to do this before. He explains how he has dealt with those who have been denounced as Christians:

I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.

He continues:

Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ - none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do - these I thought should be discharged.²

It seems that the essence of the crime that Christians were committing was to refuse to worship the emperor and the official gods of the State. The cult of the Emperor as a god may seem absurd to us, but to intelligent Romans in positions of authority it was a key mark of allegiance to the Roman State, and a unifying force in a diverse Empire. Not to bow the knee to this ideology and political correctness was to be guilty of “stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy” which in Pliny’s view “surely deserve to be punished”.

² <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>

I can't help seeing parallels to situations in today's world. Churches in China have been ordered to remove crosses from their church buildings, to take down the Ten Commandments and put up the writings of President Xi Jinping instead. In our own country there's no official persecution of Christians or other people of faith, but there are conflicts between traditional Christian beliefs and newer ideologies, particularly with regard to marriage and gender identity. Christian societies at universities have been disaffiliated from student unions and from funding, because they did not affirm same-sex marriage, abortion or transgender ideology. Christian speakers have been "no-platformed", a registrar and a sex therapist lost their jobs over their Christian beliefs, and a couple who owned a bakery company in Northern Ireland had to fight a long legal battle against the Equality Commission over whether they should be obliged to make a cake containing a message which they did not agree with.

Holding to the belief that marriage should be between one man and one woman is in the view of some an example of the same "stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy" which Pliny criticised. Or in modern parlance, it's called "hate speech". You're allowed to worship your God, provided that you accept the validity of other people's gods. Because Christians in the Roman Empire claimed that the Roman gods did not exist, they were labelled atheists, and were considered dangerous because ordinary people believed that the world depended on the gods for providing the necessities of life. The conversion of citizens to Christianity meant that fewer sacrifices were made to the gods, which could only have disastrous consequences for society.

While Pliny was Governor of Bythnia-Pontus, Polycarp was probably already Bishop of Smyrna in the province of Asia in the west of Turkey. It is likely he was born around 70 AD, just after the persecution under Nero, but his adolescence and early adulthood were during the persecution by the Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). The book of Revelation was written during one or other of these periods. The poetic language in Revelation very clearly refers to the totalitarian nature of the State, portrayed as "the Beast"³ and the ideology which supported it portrayed as a second beast which is later called "the false prophet"⁴. The vision of John in Revelation shows people being forced to worship the image of the Beast – a clear reference to burning incense to the Emperor.

Fast forward to 156 AD⁵. Polycarp, a much loved and respected bishop, is now 86 years old. Hearing of the arrests of a number of Christians, he hides in a farm outside the city, but is betrayed by a slave boy who is tortured to make him reveal where Polycarp is. When the police arrive at the cottage where Polycarp is praying for the church and the world, the bishop offers them food and drink, and they let him pray a bit longer. Then he is taken to the arena, where the crowd have been watching a display of wild beasts. The Proconsul, seeing his age, tries to persuade

³ Revelation 13:1-10

⁴ Revelation 13:11-15, 19:20

⁵ Some scholars believe Polycarp died in 155 AD, some give a much later date

him to burn incense. I quote from the contemporary document *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*:

But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ," Polycarp said, "Eighty-six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

But on his persisting again and saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered, "If you suppose vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you are ignorant who I am, hear plainly: I am a Christian. But if you would learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing."

... Saying these things and more besides, he was inspired with courage and joy, and his countenance was filled with grace, so that not only did it not drop in dismay at the things which were said to him, but on the contrary the proconsul was astounded and sent his own herald to proclaim three times in the midst of the stadium, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian."

When this was proclaimed by the herald, the whole multitude both of Gentiles and of Jews who dwelt in Smyrna cried out with ungovernable wrath and with a loud shout, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teaches multitudes not to sacrifice nor worship." Saying these things, they shouted aloud and asked the Asiarch Philip to let a lion loose upon Polycarp. But he said that it was not lawful for him, since he had brought the sports to a close.

Then they thought fit to shout out with one accord that Polycarp should be burned alive. For it must needs be that the matter of the vision should be fulfilled, which was shown him concerning his pillow, when he saw it on fire while praying, and turning round he said prophetically to the faithful who were with him, "I must needs be burned alive."

You can read the rest of the story yourselves if you wish⁶, but because of time I must leave it there. Suffice it to say that when the first attempt to burn Polycarp alive fails, he is stabbed to death, but then his body is burned. The account is part of a letter which the church in Smyrna sent to other churches at their request, and several manuscripts have been preserved.

Polycarp and us

I often wonder if I would have the courage to face arrest and even martyrdom as Polycarp did. I hope that I and you will never have to suffer as many Christians do today. But the reality of persecution today prevents us from treating the suffering of the early church as just some tale from the distant past. There are several points I take away from the story of Polycarp.

⁶ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/polycarp-smyrnaeans.html>

1. The first is that we need to show solidarity with our brothers and sisters throughout the world who face persecution. We won't hear much about this from the media, but charities like Barnabas Fund⁷ can supply plenty of information for our prayers, and opportunities for us to help financially.
2. We need to recognise that there are ideological differences between the teachings of the Christian faith and some of the things people believe today. It's all too easy to be swept along by the latest fashionable beliefs, without critically examining them in the light of Christian teaching, together with scientific and other evidence. It's naïve to think that all well-intentioned people will think alike. Before asking, "what do most people think about this?" ask yourself "what might God think about this?" or "what Christian principles are relevant to this issue?"
3. Don't expect to be popular with others for being a Christian. However reasonable you may be, and however tolerant of other people's rights to disagree, you may be misunderstood, or people may disagree with you so strongly that they see you as a threat and slander you. The crowd responded to Polycarp with hatred. We may face that too. Social media is a great tool for spreading slander and hatred. We need to pray for Christian leaders and those in the public eye.
4. You don't need to be an expert to be a faithful follower of Christ. Polycarp may have been a bishop and a clever man, but he did not try to argue his way out of trouble. There could be no more powerful answer than his words to the Proconsul: "Eighty-six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Whatever is thrown at you, hold on to Christ. He died for you. What are you willing to do for him?

Questions to consider

- What can I do to increase my awareness of the suffering of fellow Christians and my prayer for them?
- What current issues am I aware of where Christian faith and secular ideology conflict?
- How willing am I to be known as a Christian?

Full length feature film (92 mins) *Polycarp* (2015) available to watch on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njp3WNVQ9O4>

⁷ Why not have a read of <https://barnabasfund.org/magazine/> ?