

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER

CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT/APPG FOR INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF EVENT July 2014

I want to thank both the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion and Belief, and Christians on the Left, for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

It is a pleasure to share a platform with both Stephen and Elizabeth.

Last month the world united in revulsion at the case of 27-year-old Meriam Ibrahim who looked likely to become a 21st-century Christian martyr.

Yesterday Pope Francis spoke at a Mass in honour of Christian martyrs killed under Roman Emperor Nero.

At the Mass he said that there are more martyrs today than there were in the first centuries of Christianity.

Just take a moment to reflect on that.

The first centuries of Christianity are often described as being scarred by blood, violence and brutality.

And yet the plight of Christians today could go down in history as one of the most brutal periods of our common history.

But although the persecution of Christians is one of the most prevalent forms of human rights abuses in the world today, it is also one of the least known in the West, and least discussed in politics.

I think that needs to change, and I think that we need to be the pioneers of that change.

We need to help awaken people's conscience to the plight of Christians around the world today who face persecution in more countries than ever before in our history.

Why do I say this.

I say it as a practicing member of the Church of Scotland – concerned about the safety and dignity of my fellow Christians.

But I also say it as a politician committed to basic human rights for all – for people of all faiths, but also for people of none.

Because wherever Christians are persecuted, the right to religious freedom for all is jeopardized.

When Prince Charles warned last year that Christianity was at risk of extinction in the lands of its birth, I don't believe that he was scaremongering.

Across the Middle East, Christians have lived for almost two millennia in the place their faith was born, and since thrived within communities across the region.

The Ottoman Empire, which spanned much of today's modern Middle East, was a multicultural state, with Christians co-habiting alongside Shia, Sunni, Jews, Alawites and Druze.

Yet today the conflicts raging across the region – in Syria and Iraq most acutely - are taking on an increasingly sectarian character.

In Syria, since the start of the conflict, hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled the country.

In Egypt, the plight of the Coptic Christians is of growing concern with Amnesty reporting that last year alone, over 200 Churches were attacked and many Orthodox churches completely destroyed.

So for understandable reasons, much of the media attention is currently focused on events in the Middle East.

And it is easy to assume that persecution against Christians occurs almost exclusively in that region.

But assaults against Christians transcend any one regional, ideological, or religious fault line.

And although Christian persecution is growing across the Middle East, tragically the plight of Christian's today is global and not regional.

As Elizabeth's remarks reminded us, in Burma – ethnic-minority Christians, along with Rohingya Muslims, have faced ongoing abuses.

Last year over 60 churches were attacked and Christian leaders have reportedly been attacked or kidnapped by members of the security services.

In China, the world's most populous nation: Catholics and Protestants refusing to register with the communist dictatorship face arrests.

In Ethiopia, over 3,000 people, mostly evangelical or Pentecostal Christians, are said to now be in jail - purely on religious grounds.

In North Korea, a totalitarian tyranny, the government imprisons, tortures, and executes Christians.

And in Pakistan, Christians face a government that can imprison them unjustly under blasphemy laws.

Last September, suicide bombers launched the worst assault against Christians in Pakistan's history, leaving, at least 80 dead and more than 150 other parishioners wounded at a Peshawar church.

Members of my own denomination, the Church of Scotland, felt that tragedy very personally when Rev Aftab Gohar, minister in Abbotsgrange Church in Grangemouth, discovered that his 79-year-old mother, nephew, niece, two uncles and other friends and relatives were among those killed in the attack.

In the UK today, perhaps through a misplaced sense of political correctness, or some sense of embarrassment at 'doing God' in an age when secularism is more common, too many politicians seem to fear discussing matters related to faith.

So the growing persecution of Christians around the world remains a story that goes largely untold, as does proper discussion of its complex roots and causes.

In some countries around the world this persecution is perpetrated in the name of a secular ideology, while in other countries it has its roots in religious intolerance.

So the perpetrators' motivation is not the primary issue of concern, nor can it be a reason for ignoring the consequences; our neighbours are being attacked for their faith and that can never be acceptable or justified whatever the reason given.

People of all faiths and none should be horrified by this persecution.

We cannot and we must not stand by on the other side in silence for fear of offence.

So just like anti-semitism or Islamaphobia, anti-Christian persecution must be named for the evil that it is, and challenged systematically by people of faith and of no faith.

To do so is not to support one faith over another - it is to say that persecution and oppression of our fellow human beings in the name of any god or ideology is never acceptable and is morally repugnant.

In this twenty-first century we should be supporting the building of societies that respect human rights, the rule of law and make clear that freedom of religion or belief is a universal concern.

Politicians in general share a heavy burden of responsibility to tackle this growing plight.

And today, this government bears witness to a very real moment of opportunity to take action on this issue.

Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom...to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

This year the UK assumed its place on the UN Human Rights Council.

As part of that body the UK Government must commit to using this platform to speak up for religious freedom as a fundamental human right and speak out against the persecution of Christians.

And if the UK government does so, we, as the Opposition, will support them.