

Holy Rice

How much time do we give to the persecuted church in our prayers, our thoughts, our giving? As Prince Charles recently said, "They are our brothers and sisters in Christ." A World Watch List has named fifty countries that are most hostile to believers. In the top ten, nine are Muslim majority countries. Militant Islam has continued to increase in influence and is the source of severe persecution of Christians in thirty-six of the countries in the top fifty. Yet much of the free world stays silent and sometimes even the church passes by on the other side of the road



Topping the list at number one, and it has held that position since 2003, is North Korea. Despite attempts to stamp out the Christian faith, the church is surviving in North Korea and growing. It is estimated that there are between 200,000 and 400,000 believers. 50,000 to 70,000 of these are held in labour camps that are surrounded by barbed wire and beyond this there are minefields. Sentries keep watch from seven-metre tall towers. People die of hunger or sickness and executions take place. On a starvation diet of a handful of maize three times a day, prisoners try to supplement their meagre rations by catching vermin or making soup from plants they can find. Most Christians are held in what is known as a "total control zone". Here, they are separated from other prisoners, punished more severely and receive even less food. Once or twice a month, at a gathering of prisoners, one or two Christians would be asked to denounce their faith. Frequently they are beaten and killed when they refuse to do so. Often they sing songs or simply say "Amen".

Anyone in possession of a bible is immediately arrested, likewise Christians meeting together. Children are asked at school if their parents read from a black book. There are random house searches and weekly critique sessions, in which all citizens have to participate. When a Christian is discovered, whole families are taken into custody including children and parents. It has rightly been said that North Korea is the hardest place on earth to be a believer. Some are executed immediately by firing squads in front of large crowds.

Christians still manage to meet together, often no more than two people. They worship in complete silence, mouthing hymns and prayers. Occasionally two Christians will meet in a remote place and share a Bible verse. That is their church. All know the consequences of following Jesus but are prepared to face imprisonment, torture and death rather than deny their Lord. They perhaps, much more than us, rely on the inner voice of the Holy Spirit, "Speak to that person" or, "Beware of that one".

In North Korea millions of people are without adequate food, a situation caused partly by natural disasters but also by mismanagement and corruption. Christians have just as little

food as others, but they have reinstated the practice of “holy rice”, that is, rice that is set apart for God. They share this with people who have even less food than themselves.

Most North Koreans, fed continuous propaganda, are brainwashed and will believe no ill of their leaders. The founder of the ruling dynasty, Kim Il-Sung, is worshipped as a god. Most of us will have seen on television North Koreans weeping at his mausoleum. No doubt much of this is theatrical but not all. Christians worship, not Kim Il Sung but the Lord Jesus Christ. They are a constant threat to the regime. Part of the North Korean ideology is “self-reliance”. Christian’s care for the sick, the orphans and the hungry when no-one else does, as commanded by God, is seen as a criminal act and makes them enemies of the State.

Some escape into China, crossing the Tumen River, freezing in winter and with strong currents in summer. The border is guarded on both sides. About half of those who manage to escape are arrested and are returned to face punishment in North Korea. This is either a harsh prison camp or execution. Christian safe houses exist in China. There are North Koreans who, having escaped, become Christian, in China. Some bravely return (wading back across the Tumen River) to their homeland, to support their brothers and sisters in Christ. When did we last pray for the North Korean Church? When did we last thank God for their courage and faith? “The world was (is) not worthy of them”,¹ neither are we. One Korean Church leader stated, “With your support and prayers, and under the leadership and guidance of our Mighty King, we will continue to work in His Kingdom. We fear nothing.”

¹ Heb. 11:38