

A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the Syrian Orthodox Church, Acton, London

17 December 2014

Archbishop, Ladies and Gentlemen, I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to return to this wonderful church and your congregation in this season of Advent – although as I stand here surrounded by Wise Men from the East, today feels to me rather more like Epiphany!

I am enormously grateful to you for your wonderful gift, which I shall treasure and I know my small grandson will as well.

Archbishop, as some of you may be aware, this is the third visit that I have paid in recent weeks to churches whose congregations have the soul-destroying experience of inhuman persecution. In this Advent season, a season of celebration, it is the more profoundly heart-breaking that so many Christians are being persecuted for their faith. For more than twenty years I have tried to build bridges between people of different faiths and have appealed for greater understanding, for greater tolerance and for harmony between the great religions of the world. At a time when so little is held sacred, it is quite literally diabolical that these symbolic bridges should be so destroyed.

And yet there are people who, in the name of their religion, can find it in themselves to disregard the sacred and to persecute people of another faith, or of a different branch of their own faith. So you must not forget that Muslims in Iraq and Syria have been victims of appalling persecution as well as Christians and Yazidis. As I have said before, it seems to me that all faiths to some extent shine a light on the divine image in every human life. If that is so, then surely to destroy another human being is to desecrate the image of the Divine. To do so in the name of faith is, surely, nothing less than a sacrilege.

I need hardly say that the murder of one hundred and forty one people, one hundred and thirty two of them children, in Peshawar yesterday by fanatics claiming to act in the name of Islam was a sickening example of such sacrilege. It was also a horrific reminder that Muslims themselves are the victims of the violent intolerance of the extremists. The many, many families in Pakistan who have lost children, other relatives, friends and colleagues in the massacre are in my prayers this afternoon.

I have been deeply distressed by the horrific scenes of violence and bestial brutality coming out of the Middle East -where Christianity was born including from countries, let us remember, like Syria, to which St. Paul went to preach the Gospel and where Christians have lived peaceably with their neighbours for nearly two thousand years.

I can only commend those members of the Media, some of whom I know are here today, for helping to ensure that the world is not allowed to forget the stark horror of what is happening in Iraq and Syria; not to forget our brothers and sisters whose faith is, quite literally, under fire; not to forget the unimaginable barbarity to which they have been exposed; not to forget the many, many people who have been savagely murdered or who have died fleeing violence; not to forget those who have lost everything, including their houses; not to forget that countless thousands have had to leave the places in which their families have lived for innumerable generations.

I have today met several of you who have suffered the indescribable tragedy of losing members of your families and your homes to persecution. The anguish of all this does not bear thinking about, and my heart goes out to you all. Many of us in this country have the greatest possible admiration for your courage and unswerving faithfulness in the face of such cruelty inflicted by those who would have you renounce your faith.

For now, the possibility of returning to the lands in which your families and communities have lived for so many centuries is, indeed, remote. However, I do pray most fervently that the situation there will change; that peace will return; that the time will come when you feel it is safe to return to your homeland and that, once there, you will be free, together with those of other religions, to celebrate your faith without any fear of persecution.

Archbishop, Ladies and Gentlemen in the meantime, I can only leave you with my prayers and blessings, however inadequate they may be, together with these words of St. Paul's, which resonate across two millennia – "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed".