

After Christmas I had some time off, and it was a great opportunity to catch up with reading books that I have wanted to read for a long time. I would like to mention two books, in particular.

The first is a book by John Pollock. It is a dramatized account of the life of the Apostle Paul. Pollock describes time and again the hardships that Paul had to endure because of his message. His vivid description is based on what Paul himself wrote to the church in Corinth:

I have worked much harder than others. I have been in prison more often. I have been hurt more in beatings. I have been near death many times. Five times the Jews have given me their punishment of 39 lashes with a whip. Three different times I was beaten with rods. One time they tried to kill me with stones. Three times I was in ships that were wrecked, and one of those times I spent the night and the next day in the sea. I have gone on many travels. And I have been in danger from rivers, from thieves, from my own people, the Jews, and from those who are not Jews. I have been in danger in cities, in places where no one lives, and on the sea. And I have been in danger with false brothers. I have done hard and tiring work, and many times I did not sleep. I have been hungry and thirsty. Many times I have been without food. I have been cold and without clothes.

And yet, Paul never gave up preaching the good news of Jesus wherever he went. Like Isaiah, he was determined: "I will not keep silent!" In the end, after serving and preaching the gospel relentlessly for almost thirty years, he was executed for his faith by the Romans.

The other book I started reading last week is by a Japanese author, Shusaku Endo. It is called "Silence". It tells the story of two Portuguese missionaries in the 17th century. It is a period of unrivalled persecution of Christians in Japan. What this book reveals about the church and the missionaries in Japan around 1600 AD is the total opposite of what Pollock tells us about Paul and his contemporaries. The church in Japan is called "Kakure Kirishitan"—the "Hidden Christians". Bold missionaries are silenced in their proclamation of the gospel, as they are faced with unending torture, the kind that makes even crucifixion almost look like a children's game.

The gospel is good news. That is what the Greek word "euangelion" literally means, and that is what it actually is: very, very good news. So the questions arise: Why on earth would people be so passionate to kill and torture good and innocent people to make sure that God's good news for the world is no longer spread and heard? What makes the gospel so offensive and dangerous to them that it has to be suppressed at any cost? And on the other hand, what makes the gospel so compelling, that others will not keep silent about it, even at the risk of suffering the most unbearable torture and losing their lives?

Perhaps, you have heard the term: "The gospel in a nutshell". Do you know what people mean when they talk about the gospel in a nutshell? Right! It is the Gospel of John, 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

But there is another nutshell in the Bible, a nutshell that describes the original gospel message more accurately. That nutshell is right here in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, and verse 15:

“The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

That is the gospel that John the Baptist preached as he prepared the way for Jesus. And that is the message that Jesus echoed after him when he started his own preaching ministry. Like in our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah, everything in the gospel focuses on the salvation that God is about to bring upon his people. That’s the good news. But in the teaching of Jesus, salvation is much more than just the kindly smile of a pathetic God showering love and forgiveness on all people, no questions asked. And here it is that we find the reason why some want to silence the voice of the gospel and others just cannot keep quiet about it.

You see, there are many very powerful people in this world - and in our society - who don’t want to share their power. They don’t want to be held accountable for what they are doing. Look at the world news from many different corners of the world. You see it constantly. When we look at the opening verses of the Bible, we see that the core of man’s rebellion against God in the garden of Eden was that they wanted to be like God: powerful, rich and autonomous. They did not want to give account for their actions and choices to any other authority. Nothing new under the sun!

Today's Gospel story tells us that "John was put in prison". Why was that? Because he criticized king Herod Antipas for his indecent relationship with his brother's wife Herodias. The king put him into prison to silence him and, in the end, beheaded him. He and his wife could no longer bear the voice of one who could not keep silent.

Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. The truth is that sooner or later there comes a conflict of interests if we want to serve God wholeheartedly. It makes it impossible to pursue power or wealth for ourselves. And at times it can make it extremely hard to serve those who have authority over us. The early Christians could not worship the Roman Emperor who proclaimed himself Lord and Son of God. They had only one King, only one Lord, and they knew only one Son of God—Jesus Christ. That's why the Romans regularly turned against the Christians in the Empire. They did not accept competition from Jesus.

Just as in the time of the Apostle Paul, still today being a follower of King Jesus can cost your life. Or here in Canada, in what many people would still consider a Christian nation, following Christ can cost you your job, your career opportunities, and more.

But we have all the more reason to speak out for Christ and not to keep silent. Because his kingship is not just a religious belief. It is a reality. It is reality right here and now in the lives of those who have declared loyalty to King Jesus. And it is about to become a global reality, when Jesus will come again to reign over the whole world and judge all humankind.

"I will not be silenced" 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, Isaiah 62:1-3, Mark 1:14-15

Paul loved Jesus. But thanks to Jesus, he learned to love the people that Jesus came to save—Jews and non-Jews alike. He wanted to make every effort to extend that saving grace to every person living on the face of the earth. He was ready to suffer and die so that they might receive eternal life.

Let's pray to God for such passionate love for him and for others, that we cannot keep silent, even if the price for speaking up can be very high. Amen.