

The Ultimate Cost of Discipleship

My wife and I first met Bonny Weatherall at *All Saints* Anglican Church in Beirut, Lebanon. A committed American Christian, and a qualified midwife, she and her Australian husband were working with "Operation Mercy" in the southern Lebanese port city of Sidon. The old city has existed since the days of the Old Testament prophets. Tradition says that Jesus visited Sidon. More recently, the area around Sidon has been linked to Islamic organisations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

I visited Sidon on numerous occasions and always felt welcome. However, concerns often were raised about militancy in the nearby Ein el Hilweh Palestinian Camp. (Large numbers of Palestinians, displaced from their homes in what is now Israel in 1948 and not allowed to return, live in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and the Gulf states.)

For three years Bonnie had worked in Sidon on a voluntary basis, serving women from Ein el Hilweh and teaching them nursing skills. She spoke of the love she felt for women in the area and the fact that this stage of her life was committed to helping them. Bonnie felt her life could make a difference and, like other Christians we knew, served the inhabitants of the camps out of her love for Christ.

Early in the morning of 21 November 2002, Bonnie answered the door of her office at the health clinic and was confronted by an unidentified man. Without warning he produced a 7-millimetre pistol and shot her three times in the head. She died on the spot. In the aftermath of her murder a number of organisations made claims impugning her motives for helping Palestinians and attributed her death to Islamic justice. Evangelical church leaders made an effort to convey to local leaders the fact that they saw beyond the tragic event and wanted to demonstrate the love of Christ. Police claimed they were unable to conclude whether killing Bonnie was an anti-American statement (a number of attacks had been made against American outlets since earlier in the year and anti-American feelings were running high in the context of discussions about a possible invasion of Iraq). Whatever the spin others put on the event, the only reason Bonnie was in Sidon was because she believed Jesus had called her to serve him in Lebanon. She had been there long enough for her work to be well known and her face recognised in the street. Strict Muslims approved of her death, regardless of the humanitarian work she was carrying out, because she was not a Muslim and was having an influence on Muslim women and children.

Some Western diplomats in Beirut, swayed by (and echoing) what I knew to be anti-Christian propaganda put out by the Muslim Governor of Sidon, told me they thought Bonnie was unwise operating in the region. I think they missed the point completely. Bonnie knew threats existed but had consciously made a decision to be a witness for Jesus despite the potential reactions. "They loved not their lives unto death" (Revelation 12:11). Madness? In the eyes of the world, certainly, but in God's sight esteemed as a consequence of following Christ in the shadow of the cross.

Who wants to be a “witness?”

When I was a boy I read a brochure about missionary life and work and told my friends that I wanted to go to Zambia as a missionary. I learned all I could about men like David Livingstone, explorers, missionaries, doctors, walking through jungle and savannah, facing constant threats of disease, physical attack and wild animals, opening up an unknown continent to European missionary endeavour. Years later I stood at the tomb of Livingstone in Westminster Abbey and marvelled at the courage of people who gave all they had to spread the Gospel. I visited the Anglican Cathedral in Lusaka and saw proof that the faithful work of those first missionaries, many of whom died in the process, was still bearing fruit long after they passed on.

But being a witness isn't just emulating pioneers, but living for Christ where we. Around the same time, friends of my father who were serving as missionaries in the north-east of the Congo became bystanders in a civil war that took the lives of thousands of Congolese. Soon after gaining independence on 30 June 1960, conflicts broke out. Secessionist moves by rebels in the mining province of Katanga, combined with inter-tribal violence, anti-communist sentiment, economic turmoil and a mutiny in the army led to the assassination of the first President, Patrice Lumumba, and United Nations intervention. For four years problems simmered beneath the surface, only to re-emerge in 1964 in the form of an uprising by rebels calling themselves “simbas (Swahili for “lion”). Foreign missionaries working in the country (many missionaries remained long after the departure of Western businesspeople) became targets. They had remained, convinced God had called them to make every sacrifice, including their own lives if necessary, to share his love with unbelievers. More than one hundred missionaries lost their lives, bludgeoned to death, including my father's friends.

Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Christians everywhere are happy to sign on to being his witnesses. What few realise is that the Greek word for “witness” is “martyrus”, the root of our word “martyr”. Now who wants to be a witness, if it incurs the risk of pain and suffering? Who is eager to give their testimony if they might be called upon to deny what they testify to, under threat of penalty of death?

Jesus promised His followers they would experience persecution: “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you... But all these things they will do to you for my name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent me” (John.15:20). Paul reminded Timothy that those who live Godly lives for Christ will experience persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

When I was growing up, “Fox's Book of Martyrs” was popular in Christian circles. As I read stories of Christians being tortured and giving up their lives for Christ I often wondered what it would be like to suffer for my faith. I'll admit I don't like pain, but there was something appealing about these men and women (some were children) laying everything down for Jesus. If there were Christians who took literally Jesus call to take up their cross and follow him, as a mark of true discipleship, they were the heroes, the best.

They took their lives into their own hands, virtually carrying nooses, bullets and other instruments of death and following Jesus as far as it was humanly possible to do so.

Christians continue to be persecuted

Record numbers of Christians are suffering for their faith in Christ. More believers have been martyred during the past hundred years than in the previous nineteen hundred. The collapse of the Soviet Union has not diminished the threat, just redirected it in line with the growth of anti-Christian forces linked to Islam, Hinduism and other faiths.

The last time I met with “David” he explained that his next goal was to get into Afghanistan and help Christian workers. Due to complex circumstances, he ultimately ended up in jail in Iran facing the possibility of a death sentence. David had travelled into Iran from Turkmenistan for a brief contact visit and was detained on the way out of the country. Escorted back to Tehran, he was told his activities as a Christian were regarded as serious and that he would be charged under espionage laws that outlawed fomentation of social unrest. For many weeks we prayed and lobbied for his release. He was eventually allowed out of Iran, following high level representations, but those he left behind had no such protection. We thanked God for his release but soberly considered other Christians in Iran, who are arrested, beaten and sometimes die for their faith alone.

Few martyrs today are Westerners and most suffer without the rest of the world knowing anything about it – or caring. Sometimes they are attacked because they do not comply when authorities forbid Christian gatherings. (I have had to go elaborate ends to meet with Christians leaders in North Africa, not because they posed a threat to society but because the paranoid totalitarian Islamist authorities did not entertain Christian activities.) Such gatherings are labelled subversive by dictatorial governments that do not allow independent thought on the part of cowed citizens. Christian belief flies in the face of secularist or cult value systems. Sudanese Christian leaders I have met over time have spoken with sorrow about the pain that continues to be visited on Christians in the south of his country, as the government in Khartoum tries to Arabize and Islamize the country. The civil war there has raged for thirty years and most suffering on the part of the church has gone unnoticed.

Christians believe they are commanded by Scripture to obey their rulers, but they also look for a higher “kingdom” whose builder and maker is God (cf Hebrews 11:10), not an earthly utopia. Others are targeted because they evangelize in the name of Christ. They posit their actions on Peter’s bold declaration, “We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-29). Accepting that alone Jesus is “the way, and the truth and the life” (Jn. 14:6), his disciples are rejected, ridiculed, threatened and antagonised by other religions and even alienated their own families. Still others are targeted simply because they are Christians.

In such societies it is often illegal (or at least culturally unacceptable) to turn from the officially sanctioned religion and embrace Christian faith; such actions are regarded as apostasy and are interpreted as unconstitutional or disloyal. A handful of societies prescribe the death penalty for conversion – and those who are instrumental in winning converts to Christ.

How can our faith be relevant in a world where Christians are arrested, imprisoned; tortured and killed for their faith? After all, if one suffers we all suffer. Those who do so are brothers and sisters in Christ. And what is the most appropriate response? The enemies of Christ want the chastened church to comply by shutting up shop and moving away. However, there are alternatives.

The ultimate cost of discipleship

When Rohan Dissanayeke visited our church in Canberra he and his wife, Alison, were excited about sharing their faith in his native Sri Lanka. Having visited South Asia, I was enthralled by Rohan's vision to reach polytheistic Hindus working in tea plantations with the Gospel of the Only God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Imagine the reaction in our community when we learned that Rohan had been killed. He was driving back from a prayer meeting with friends in Sri Lanka, when he was pulled over by Tamil Tigers who mistook his identity and riddled the car with bullets. Rohan knew that being a witness for Jesus Christ in a part of the world that was in turmoil because of a long-standing insurgency posed personal danger. He did not expect to die for his faith, but it happened. After returning to Australia for a period, Alison made the bold decision to go back to Sri Lanka and continue his work.

Extremist Hindu groups have been blamed for escalating anti-Christian violence in India over recent years. Countless numbers of Christians suffer persecution and death for their commitment to following Christ. You will not read their stories in the West, but they are martyrs, living and dying to proclaim Christ, considering their lives of little value compared to making Him known.

Occasionally Westerners are attacked and the world becomes aware of the threat. Graham Staines was a distant cousin by marriage and our family had followed his progress in India with interest. He worked with lepers in the eastern Indian state of Orissa for nearly 30 years. One night he paid the supreme price of living and working for Christ. He and his sons Phillip and Timothy were sleeping in their station wagon outside a hospital near the remote village of Manoharpur, 600 miles south of New Delhi on January 23 when militants attacked them. The mob prevented Staines and the boys from getting out of the vehicle while some of their number stuffed straw inside and under the car and set fire to it. Their deaths shocked Christians and aid workers around the world. Leaders of India's 23 million Christians and hundreds of Hindu lepers took part in the funeral procession.

Not long after the murders, Graham's wife Gladys made public statements saying that she forgave the killers and remained committed to continuing her husband's work, in spite of her loss, family pressures to return to Australia, the task of raising their daughter and repeated threats against her safety. "We have to work and show that Jesus is worth dying for." What amazing courage. People who do not understand her commitment to Christ question the wisdom of remaining in India. Her position is unequivocal: "Hindus and other non-Christians have stopped me and asked me how and why I did that. But that is the Christianity we are asked to practice. Although death stares at my face, I know that Christ lives in me, and I live because of Him. And as long as he continues to give me life, I will carry on the work that is ahead of me in Baripada. I am now an Indian at heart, and this is where I will ask the Lord to call me home."

"Come and die"

What does it mean to take up our crosses and follow Jesus? It implies that, as His followers, we no longer "own" our lives? For every believer, life's circumstance and the guidance of the Holy Spirit will show us how to be true witnesses, even when there is no clear and present physical threat.

Following Jesus can also involve suffering simply because we say "yes" to Him. The deaths of dozens of Sweden's finest young Christians on a summer outreach in 1994 are a case in point.

Summer in Estonia is beautiful. It never seems to get dark. Sunny days stand in contrast to dark, cold snowy winter days that never seem to end. For the Estonian Pentecostal churches in the early 1990s this was the best time of the year to set up huge tents across the city and organise great evangelistic rallies with good music, friendship and dynamic preaching. The country's independence in 1989, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, had provided an enormous fillip for evangelism and church planting. Estonian Christians living abroad returned to help national churches make an historic impact for God in the life of the nation. Teams from around the world came to help.

During the summer of 1994 Christian groups from Sweden, including numerous members of the same Bible College and one of the country's top evangelists descended on the larger cities on Estonia for what were to be memorable days and nights of Christian witness, conversions, baptisms and church planting. All too soon the outreach was over and they set sail for home, looking forward to being reunited with loved ones and opportunities to relate what God had done through their ministry. Many of them would not make it.

In the early morning of 28 September, news reports began to filter out, indicating that a ship had sunk in the Baltic Sea. It soon became clear that the doomed vessel was the giant 15,000-ton *Estonia*, the pride of the nation's merchant fleet. The ship had foundered in bad weather and sunk, with hundreds of people trapped inside.

According to the Estonian Foreign Ministry, 1,049 people were on the ship when it capsized. Rescue services from nearby Finland did what they could, but the official toll eventually stood at 844 people. The real figure was much higher, as officials admitted many children were not registered as passengers. A hundred and forty people were saved from the frigid waters; many died because of exposure to the cold. Most passengers perished inside the darkened hull, as it was flooded with water. It took less than forty minutes for the vessel to go down. Most of the bodies were never recovered.

Enquiries revealed that enormous waves lashing the ship had torn off the 56-ton bow door. An inner door was also broken off and the open sea rushed across the decks. During the fifteen minutes it took for the *Estonia* to capsize there was chaos everywhere. Furniture became detached and crushed people. Lights were extinguished. Stairwells filled with water, blocking escape routes and drowning those below. Only a few passengers managed to escape before the ship submerged and sank. Life jackets were hard to find; lifeboats overturned. People froze to death in the bitterly cold water before rescuers could get to them. The nation was plunged into grieving.

Early one morning in the grounds of the Estonian Bible College in Suurupi I stood alone and in awe in front of the memorial to Swedish team members who had died on the *Estonia*. What a loss! How could God allow this to happen? Estonian Christians I met told me someone on the team had had a vision about impending disaster. Reading down the list of names, I thought of loved ones, work colleagues, church members, villages affected by the disaster. I thought about the impact the group had had in churches and tents around the tiny country in the days leading up to their departure. They were not martyrs in the classical sense, condemned because of their faith, but it was that faith that created the circumstances that led to their deaths. Each one had perished because he or she had chosen to be a witness, a *martyrus* for Jesus Christ, that the world might know He loved them. "For me to live is Christ; to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). As I stood by the memorial a Christian couple came up beside me. "We are worried about your trip to Helsinki." The event was fresh in their minds. "But we know God is in control". At the end of the day, that counted more than any human consolation. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15). God knows our future; at the end of the day we can trust him with our lives.

Jesus told us to count the cost of following him (Matthew 16:24; Luke 14:27-33). "For whoever will save his life shall lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25). The challenge for the rest of us, as world Christians seeking to be relevant and make a difference in our day, is to count the cost before we brashly claim that we will follow Jesus anywhere, not to baulk at the price and stop there, but go forward in faith for His name.

Only the willingness of men and women more in love with Jesus Christ than their lives, and prepared to spare nothing they hold dear to declare His love in

a world that is without eternal hope, will maintain the relevance of the Gospel in the face of hostility in the coming century.