

Conclusion

In every society and culture, whether Muslim, Hindu, Communist, Sikh, nihilist, existentialist, Jewish or animist, there are people who believe in Jesus Christ and put him first in their lives. Some are allowed to be visible, others are not. Only God knows.

There are basically two types of Christians. Those who say they are, because they need (or find it convenient) to identify with a religion, and those who are authentic followers of Christ, because they believe He is real and is living in their hearts. Which one are you?

If your faith is genuine, it will be relevant to where you are, physically and experientially, because it is not about you, or your personal circumstances or quirks, but about the eternal supremacy of Jesus Christ.

Does Christianity “work”? Can we establish a viable link between the altar and the street? Is our faith in God (as distinct from faith in faith) reified when “the rubber hits the road”? I am convinced it does. To illustrate the point, and to finish this journey, let’s look at one final story, the execution of 25-year old convicted Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van who was hanged in Changi Prison, Singapore on 2 December 2005.

I was living and working in Singapore, and close to those involved in his case, when Nguyen was executed by the authorities for trying to smuggle almost 400 grams of heroin through Changi International Airport in December 2002. A friend of mine had seen the arrest at the gate as he tried to board a flight to Australia. Nguyen told the courts that he was hoping to make enough money from transporting the drugs to pay off debts incurred by his twin brother Khoa (a former heroin addict). Along with many other people, I had followed his subsequent attempts to secure clemency from the President of Singapore, dashed as the President was guided by the prosecutors and Singapore Government inevitably to refuse the request.

Pleas to spare his life, from Australia and around the world (the dignity of human life is ill-served by killing someone) failed to move the Singaporean Government, determined to go ahead with the execution to prove its sovereignty and demonstrate it was not beholden to the opinions of others in upholding its laws.

However, Nguyen did not go to his death a terrified, emotional mess. He went peacefully. What was his secret? Much of the answer lay in his new-found Christian faith.

Born in a refugee camp in Thailand on 17 August 1980, Van went to Australia with his mother and brother Khoa when he was still small. Raised in Melbourne as a Buddhist, he attended a Roman Catholic school, but was not serious about Christianity. In 2004 he became a Christian as he waited on death row. He subsequently spent many hours with the prison chaplain as his faith deepened. Nguyen wrote of the transformation of his life after turning to Christ.

"Recognising and understanding my offence, the ramifications and subsequent repercussions as a result of my callousness has been crucial, essentially the turning point for my remorseful transformation; an opportunity of self-discovery made possible upon my conception of God and Jesus Christ into my life," Nguyen wrote in an appeal for clemency to the Singapore government.

On the eve of his execution, His lawyers told the media that "He (was) determined to go out with strength and optimism."

Van spent a sleepless last night on death row, comforted by Father Gregoire Van Giang, writing letters, praying, reading the Bible and reciting the 23rd Psalm.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil,".

Half an hour before his execution, Nguyen finished his personal memoir. Commenting on conversations over many months, and the letters just completed, his Australian lawyer, told journalists later, "[Nguyen] regarded it as one of his missions in life to convert me, so a lot of the stuff he wrote was to persuade me God loves us all, including me".

When the execution party arrived at his cell in the pre-dawn hours, Nguyen was ready and composed himself. He was not shackled. He walked with the priest the short distance to the gallows. Beside him were prison officers who had guarded him during his incarceration and who had become close to him. He was accompanied by the sounds of fellow inmates singing Christian songs.

Father Giang prayed with Nguyen one last time before, hooded and handcuffed, he was positioned on the trapdoor and dropped mercilessly to his death at 6am.

Early in the morning of Van's execution I got out of bed and sat quietly on the balcony of my 23rd floor apartment, overlooking suburban Singapore. I pondered the debate that had raged in Singapore and Australia about the merits and deterrent effect (or otherwise) of the death penalty. But this debate was not uppermost in my mind. My main concern was the individual.

As the appointed time approached I found myself praying for this young man whom I had never met, but whose conversion to Christ was being described affirmatively by media around the world. No one was being cynical, calling it "jail house religion". Those who were closest to Van said that what they were witnessing was genuine and that it gave him peace beyond any human understanding right to the end.

As the minutes passed and I realized Van Ngyuen was now dead I went back inside to start my work day. I felt mixed motions about the whole affair, but what gave me courage was the knowledge that, at the most critical time of this young man's life, it was his relationship with Jesus Christ that gave him a profound sense of hope and security that State vengeance and the hangman could not take away. And now he is in the presence of Jesus.

Hopefully none of us will ever need to experience the relevance of our Christian faith in this way. But what the preceding articles have attempted to show is that our relationship with God is not an abstract thing.

Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, whatever twists and turns, pinnacles of joy and depths of despair life delivers, the Holy Spirit will give us strength and wisdom to complete this journey hand in hand with God, knowing that our faith in God and trust in the death and resurrection of His Son for us has not been a theoretical excursion, but in the final hour will be confirmed as the most real, the most dynamically relevant, experience of all.