

Views from the Pews – We Christians are not victims

This is a deliberately eye-catching heading which is instantly contestable. Just see Acts 9;1, which we read on 25 January. Saul was breathing threats and murder against God's disciples. The crucifixion was followed by a ruthless purge, and the Conversion is all the more remarkable because of what Saul's mission had been. But the Psalm for the same Sunday begins with a clear identification of God as all-powerful protector; "Of whom then shall I be afraid?"

God is the mountain-mover, the all-powerful, a theme that spans the whole of scripture. By presenting ourselves as victims, we are downplaying and limiting our own description of God. We cannot have it both ways. Either God is all-powerful or he isn't.

This then is the danger we fall into when we adopt a politico-religious narrative that presents Christians as victims, under perpetual threat. There is a risk attached when we use this narrative to describe other faiths, other ideas. Islam and Communism are the two most commonly described threats today, but Christians are equally prone to point the finger at other branches of Christendom; for centuries Catholics were described as the main threat (or Protestants if you were Catholic).

In the quest for solidarity and for compliance, an external threat is all too convenient. The Church has often fallen into that trap. Power can too often be solidified by the manufacture of external threats.

How then to resolve this? First, read Acts and the other scriptural narratives of post-crucifixion witness. Then get into some church history, and learn to distinguish between real threats, and those exaggerated in the name of power and influence. Be aware of those who would 'save' us as part of some secular agenda. Yes, religious persecution is real and it is common, but we need to develop powers of discernment. It can well be argued that we were rescued on that first Christmas Day, rescued once and for all by a God who not only moves mountains but also moves his Son to earth to dwell with us.

We can safely end by returning to that former persecutor, as he writes to the Romans, doing his best to explain the gift of that first Christmas; "With all this in mind, what are we to say? If God is on our side, who is against us?"

Posing as victims will not do.

- Richard Swarbrick