

*The Plight of Syrian Christians*¹

Haroutune Selimian

The following are talks, sermons and other material from Haroutune's attendance at the Congregational Federation May Assembly and Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, UK.

First of all I want to thank you for this opportunity to tell you about my people. Yes, I'd better clarify. I'm a Syrian and I'm proud that I'm from the country of Syria. I'm also proud of belonging to the Christian Community of the country of Syria and more particularly from the Armenian Christian Community. When, a little more than five years ago, the problems started in our country the Christian Community made up 10 percent of the Syrian population. This has gone down considerably ever since and is still going down. If we go back a hundred years the Christian population would have been some 30 percent of Syria's population, and a city like my own, that of Aleppo, had more than 50 percent Christians.

We are not here to live in the past and every day I must remind myself that the only thing we've got is NOW and that I for a start must look at things from this perspective.

And when I go into the Scriptures I find that my country is very much part of the Bible Lands. What to say about Saul who later on became Paul the Apostle and how, right at the beginning of 'Christianity', he found himself on the way to 'my' Capital Damascus. Already back then there was a Church in Damascus, and you'd better believe it, it's still there. Back there two thousand years ago this church was so alive that the Jewish Elders back in Jerusalem wanted to put an end to it. It sent their most blood-thirsty and militant leader in the direction of Damascus and you know what happened on that road to Damascus. You also know how scared the Church in Damascus was of this Saul. They needed a divine intervention to send one of their people to meet Saul and become the means of Saul being healed and later on a 'world evangelist'.²

¹ Talk given at the Congregational Federation May Assembly in Oldham on Saturday, May 9.

² The story is told in Acts 9.10-19.

From this averted attempt at persecuting the Church of Damascus we can learn a few things. The first is that God does take care of His Church! Secondly, he uses the local Church members to take part in the change! And thirdly, the most blood-thirsty terrorists can experience the love of Jesus and the power of Jesus for change!

Last night I dared to climb to the top of our three-story building and see the darkest large city of the world. (Yes, we have heard that satellites flying across Syria at night have proved that Syria is the darkest country of all.)³ It's shocking to realise that we are living in a city without electricity and in a city with very little water in the water-taps. This is in a city which used to have five million inhabitants and a population of at least seven million people during a working day; a city with the best developed and most modern network of factories producing for Syria and the whole of the Middle East. And this is not there anymore! Even if people would be able to get to those factories they wouldn't be able to do anything as the factories have been pillaged before being destroyed.

While up on the roof I also looked around at the houses next to ours and I saw the roof of one of our own churches, Christ Church, and I thought about the shell, which fell on its roof about a week earlier and how it hadn't exploded and then I stopped thinking, as I didn't want to remind myself yet again that this shell could have caused death and destruction in a way that we simply don't want to think of. It happens far too often! Yes, yet another church had been hit, but this time it survived. I looked a bit further, without really seeing anything, and I thought of other churches in areas almost completely destroyed and how they couldn't be used for worship any longer. But in these cases that I'm talking about there is still a shell of a church-building that can be repaired.

This isn't the case with so many other churches across the country. Some of them, like the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Deir ez-Zor have all been totally destroyed during these last few years.

Yes, the plot, which was there 2,000 years ago, seems to be there today. Yes, we see that the Christians seem to be targeted. There are many reasons! One would be that we are the followers of Jesus who died on the cross and who rose from the dead. It's not the first time that the Cross seems to be particularly disliked or maybe even hated. If a church is desecrated it usually starts by the cross being broken or removed. It can be the cross on top of the church building, on graves or on the walls or on the altar. But you will hardly ever find a cross on a church that has been taken over by another force in Syria.

³ www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/satellites-capture-how-the-lights-have-gone-out-in-syria (accessed July 21, 2016).

The Christian clergy have also suffered tremendously during this war. You must have heard of my two colleagues from Aleppo, Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, and Metropolitan Paul Yazigi, Greek Orthodox Archbishop, who were kidnapped on a road out of Aleppo after they had gone to negotiate the fate of two priests who had been kidnapped earlier.⁴ Ever since that fateful day of Apr. 22, 2013 church members have been wondering what their protection can be when the heads of their churches can be abducted and no news from them or their whereabouts ever since. Others have also been released and come out in the media telling about their incredible suffering at the hands of people who seem to be addicted to blood. Only God can save a person falling into the hands of such people.

Yes, a priest from Aleppo was held for months and during the last weeks he was introduced to 41 of his parishioners, also in captivity. Just like him they were tortured and asked one by one if they'd be willing to give up their faith in Jesus Christ. Every single one said NO and made it very clear that in spite of threats and torture they would stay true to their Christian faith. Due to many people's prayer for them and their town they were later on released. Last month their town was taken back and at least one of the churches, actually in a monastic compound, had been totally destroyed and the question is now: 'Will the Christians have the courage to return?'⁵

We have faced this situation in several towns and villages across Syria. It might have started with the famous town of Maaloula, the town where the people speak the language of Jesus, Aramaic. You must have heard of the violent assault on this town. When fleeing the people in the next village, where the people also speak Aramaic but are Muslim, took the ones fleeing into their homes and took care of them. This was a sign to me and others that we are all Syrians and that we can live together and co-exist, yes, we have lived this kind of life for a long time. Now we need to find the secret behind all our communities living together in peace once more. But the people of Maaloula have been reluctant to return to their homes. They feel that the war is far too close to make them comfortable living in their beautiful town climbing the rocks in that beautiful area of Syria some 30 miles north of Damascus. The townspeople of Saidnaya learnt from the assault on Maaloula and decided to take care of their own defense of their town. You might have heard of the Greek Orthodox Convent in that town. It looks like an enormous citadel looking all over the town and with its structure it really looks as if it can defend and protect all the citizens living in the town. Yes, it's probably the biggest

⁴ <http://www.antiochian.org/2013-abductions-bishops> (accessed July 25, 2016).

⁵ For discussion of kidnappings, see <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/july-17th-2015/the-quest-to-find-syrias-kidnapped-priests/> (accessed July 25, 2016).

monastery in the whole of the Middle East and used to be a place for pilgrimage in the 'good ole' days'. Saidnaya, 20 miles north of Damascus, has survived until now and we certainly want to trust God for the safety of its inhabitants.

During the first days of Spring two years ago the Armenian town of Kessab with its many surrounding villages was taken over by forces entering from Turkey. Historically speaking Kessab is the last remnant from the Armenian Cilicia, which suffered heavily during the Armenian Genocide a little more than 100 years ago.⁶ Actually Cilicia hadn't been a Kingdom for hundreds of years, but until 1915 it was truly quite Armenian with city after city and town after town having a majority Armenian population with a rich cultural and spiritual life through their three Armenian communities, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church. Through an incredibly well organised effort by the Turkish government every Armenian community was systematically massacred and deported. Towards the end of the First World War mostly Armenian orphans and grandmothers settled in Aleppo and the Armenian Nation was resurrected and reborn in my City. Yes, I'm the third generation, and it will always amaze me what came from such a manifestation of poverty and depression. Those Armenians didn't only see the Armenian Nation resurrected. They built a home for the Armenians with all that this means, and now it's being destroyed.

But now back to Kessab! One day the people of Kessab were all driven out of this last remnant of the Armenian Cilicia. Every Armenian felt that their presence had once for all ceased to exist in Cilicia. This was followed by an outcry in all of Armenia and the Diaspora. Every Armenian felt from the depth of his heart that the world had decided to join up with the forces of evil against all Armenians in this geographical area, which is the Old Armenia or the Western Kingdom of Armenia. When I heard the news on that fateful morning I felt as if my heart had been taken out of me. I don't know if others can feel like the Armenians, but it was an emotion of such sadness that I was totally overwhelmed and in no way able to act.

At that very time Aleppo was under siege and it was impossible to get down to Latakia to which the Armenians had escaped. Throughout the days I was somehow able to get in touch with the clergy of Kessab and get to know a little more about the tragedy. By the time the road opened up for me to travel to Latakia we had started seeing video-clips from Kessab showing their occupiers claiming that this land conquered from the infidels was theirs from the very beginning and prepared for them to be taken over. The video-clips also showed how the crosses from the churches were being taken away and how blasphemous graffiti appeared

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16352745> (accessed July 25, 2016).

up on the walls. When meeting with the people from Kessab there was a lot of crying and a feeling of despondency reigned in most hearts. On a Sunday three months later, however, we received the news that the area had changed hands and Armenians started moving up the mountains towards the border between Syria and Turkey. They soon reached their property only to realise that most of their houses had been ransacked, together with their hotels and shops. Kessab, which until recently was one of the most popular tourist resorts in Syria, had been ruined and with a mighty neighbour like Turkey on two sides it doesn't give much protection to a community who in 107 years have had to rebuild their towns and villages three times. Quite an overwhelming fact! But the good news is that we as an Evangelical Community have been working hard at restoring people's houses and our four churches and the same goes for the Apostolic and Catholic Churches. We will also do our best to repair our Heritage Centre, which was burning as the first Armenians were returning home.

A year later, the Assyrians of the Khabur River in North-Eastern Syria suffered the fate of the Armenians in Kessab. In some ways they suffered a much worse fate, as they weren't able to escape fast enough and more than 200 villagers were taken captive and a large number of them are still being held. These are descendants of Assyrian Christians who like the Armenians suffered from a merciless genocide in Eastern Turkey during the First World War, when many were massacred and all had to flee their villages. They first settled in Iran before moving on to Northern Iraq, Kurdistan, where they for about twenty years until 1937 lived in their own huts and houses, when their neighbours attacked them and drove them out permanently. The French authorities then resettled them on the banks of the Khabour River, which has been their home ever since until the year 2015.

By now this area has also changed hands, as you might have been hearing on the news. The Assyrian Christians have been asked to return to their villages with their destroyed churches, schools and houses and a minority of the Assyrians are thinking about going back. To be driven out three times in a century will make anybody think twice about 'going home'. Yes, many have already made it to Europe where they feel more secure than in their picturesque villages, which they themselves have built.

Religiously speaking we belong to the wrong religion to live in the Middle East. This is a matter of fact! At any time in recent history we know that matters can get worse real fast. We know that we, according to the people of the majority religion, belong to the 'dhimmi'⁷ and this means

⁷ See Issa Diab, 'The Congregational Way in the Middle East', *ICJ* 6.2, Summer 2007, pp. 127-140, pp. 138-9.

in practical terms that we must either accept the majority religion as our own religion in order to live 'free lives' or agree to be a protected person according to their definitions with no way of negotiating the fate of one's community. Due to the 'luxury' of having lived in a secular state for so many years we as Christians have benefited greatly and the way we have built our churches and held our worship services has given us a lot of freedom to simply be Christians. No Christian wants to go back to a system of 'dhimmitude' and for most of us it's out of question. To accept 'dhimmitude' is like saying that all of these years of trying to develop Syria and other countries of the Middle East have been in vain and we have simply decided to go back to a past that was and is unfit for any human being.

Yes, the forecasts are grim for the whole of the Middle East. When I visit Lebanon I hear of Lebanese deciding to leave for this very reason. They say: 'With Syria falling prey to the religious militants they will soon come across our border and find enough support in our country to make the change possible here as well. It's just a matter of time. We don't want our children to experience anything like this. We have decided to leave before it's too late.' Yes, this is a statement made by a person who lived through the whole of the Lebanese Civil War, but who has realised that the Christian presence is doomed and the future looks bleaker than ever for Christianity in the Middle East and for Christianity in Syria in particular.

But then my own heart starts speaking again. I start living now and suddenly my heart comes alive. It's full of the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. It's about loving our neighbour and Jesus makes it very clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan that our 'neighbour' is not really the friendly neighbour next door, but a stranger, who we don't want anything to do with.⁸ And what to say about Jesus' telling us to 'love our enemies'?⁹ Isn't he going a bit too far? The truth is that during these five years of war we have met many people who have been in the hands of their enemies and, yes, they keep on loving them and praying for them.

Yes, the Syrian Church was persecuted from the first day of its existence, as we heard at the beginning of my speech. Saul, the enemy of the Church, had a meeting with the Living Jesus Christ, whom he persecuted, and his life was changed. The course of the Church was changed as Saul becoming Paul became the person who reached out beyond his own community. Paul reached Europe with the Gospel and he was one of the first people who reached out to the people of the Syrian City of Antioch, where they first were called Christians. He realised that the mission to make Jesus Christ known should be taken seriously both at

⁸ Lk. 10.25-37.

⁹ Mt. 5.43.

home, in Syria, and to the end of the world. Has the time come for us from the Christian Community of Syria to reach out beyond our communities and see the new Christian Church born once more in a living way in Syria and beyond?

Interview

Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, has been praying for the Christians of Aleppo, and for Haroutune Selimian, since the start of the crisis in Syria. This interview was conducted by Janet Wootton at the morning service on Sunday May 8, 2016.

It is an absolute pleasure to welcome you here, because we've been praying for the people and the churches of Syria, and for you by name, for many years, and so it is wonderful to have you here in Bunyan Meeting.

There are things we would like to know as a praying church so that we can continue to pray for you. Could you tell us a little bit about the background of the churches in Aleppo?

Thank you, Janet for welcoming me. I feel that I am in my home town church, and it is so charming to hear of your prayers.

Actually the day I left Aleppo it was all bombarded, especially the neighbourhood where the church is located. At the time when I was passing through the neighbourhood on my way here, with my wife and my son, a bomb fell on a large hospital, and the whole building fell; just 10 minutes after we had passed by. So the situation is horrible. It is not possible to describe the destruction.

But the church is there. We cannot promise honey to the people, but we can promise that we will be with them till the end. The church is the vehicle for carrying hope for the people because the church possesses all the power and the energy and the vision and the trust that Christ has given.

People are looking for hope to survive, but they don't find any, except in Jesus.

And the church shows this by doing practical things to help people to survive.

Yes. People don't have any work, they have lost their homes, their shops, their markets, so they have none of the things they need to continue their lives. To help them live, the church distributes food packs. And we have

started digging holes, digging wells in the church courtyard, and bringing out drinkable water, which we distribute to the people, because the city of Aleppo has been out of water for two years now.

We don't even think about electricity. There is no electricity. From time to time they give one hour of electricity, and we consider that a luxury.

Also because of a lack of hospitals and doctors we have started a pharmacy in the church. We to serve people without discrimination, giving them diagnosis and medication, also we follow up with people.

Also we have a trauma team in the school and in the church so that we can help people especially children, who are under stress and under war trauma, for example, if they were captured.

It's absolutely amazing to hear these things. One thing you said just now struck me particularly: that you are with the people to the end.

Exactly

. . . in the same way that Jesus is with us.

Exactly

Aren't you tempted to flee?

Personally I am very much convinced that, as the war is getting more intense, my commitment to stay with my people is increasing. Many people accuse me - yesterday I showed a letter to brother Chris Gillham, to show how people are asking us why we are staying in the war and in the church. They say what we are doing is wrong. You have to go out, and take your people, your congregation out with you, by staying you are risking your life and you are risking the life of the congregation.

But Syria, today's Syria and tomorrow's Syria cannot be rebuilt and restructured without the Christian church. The church should be there. I feel, *we* feel that Syria was a Christian country before it was an Islamic country. We are not newcomers, we are inhabitants of Syria. We are people who have lived here for centuries. Syria is our home and when something goes wrong in your home, you don't change your home, you fix it. We have our part in fixing Syria.

As a church here we want to know what we can do. We can continue to pray, and we can pray with more intelligence and understanding, having heard you here today. But our hearts go out to your people, here in the comfort of Bedford, how can we reach out?

I believe that prayer is the most important thing, because prayer contains power which is beyond any description. Also practically and physically you have to help the children in the schools by providing scholarships for them. Because in education we bring transformation for the new generation. Today thousands of children are outside of schools. They are in streets and in shelters and in many other places.

If the future of Syria is based upon the children, there is no bright future for Syria. So we have to take care of the children. By providing scholarships for them we can keep the doors of our schools open and look forward for a bright future.

The choir had sung Richard Jones' hymn, 'Come all who look to Christ today'. The interview ended by Janet Wootton quoting the last verse:

Come, trust in Christ and live in peace,
Anticipate that final light
When strife and bigotry shall cease,
And faith be lost in praise and sight.¹⁰

¹⁰ Richard Jones (1926 -), 'Come all who look to Christ today', v. 5.

*The Ascension of the Lord*¹¹**Haroutune Selimian**

First of all I thank you for receiving me here today. It is with deep joy that I am standing here in front of you. But you just don't know what is going on deep in my heart. A big part of my heart is with my church in Aleppo, yes, in this city that has been destroyed day after day during the last four years and when I left some days ago the shelling didn't stop for a minute and there was only violence and death everywhere. It is with this kind of background 'music' that I am talking to you this morning. Yes, I am here this morning to tell you about our wonderful Lord Jesus Christ and what he said to his eleven disciples just before leaving them and this world to be with his Father and our Father in glory.

We are very fortunate to have so many of Jesus' sayings in one book, but this was not the case with his disciples. They didn't have anything written down, but after Jesus had left them, his sayings started making sense. On that fateful last evening when they ate the Last Supper together, Jesus told them many, many things that we have been trying to interpret year after year. One of these sayings we find in the Gospel according to St John, chapter 16 and verse 28: 'I came from the Father and entered the world and now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father'. (New International Version)

Today this verse looks so clear and wonderfully understandable. Jesus came from the Father, and now he is going back to the Father. What's so difficult about that? Yes, when Jesus said this to his disciples, it was a statement of fact. But was it such an easy fact for his disciples to understand? I don't think that it was until Jesus' Ascension Day that the disciples started realizing that Jesus had said this some six weeks earlier. For his disciples this verse took Jesus beyond the Cross and his death. For a few weeks he had once again been with his disciples and their 'hearts had been warmed' and there had been some light in their dark world. But now, he, Jesus, was about to say 'Good-bye'. His disciples had started understanding that Jesus was not going to be with them forever.

But what would that last day have been like? Well, we cannot be too sure of this, but it could well have been like the day when they were at the Lake of Galilee and in the evening decided to go fishing. By the morning

¹¹ Sermon preached at Bunyan Meeting, Bedford on Sunday May 8, 2016, in the morning.

they hadn't caught any fish and then they heard a voice from the shore asking them if they had caught anything, and they said 'NO!' And Jesus told them to throw the net on the other side of the boat and they caught so many fish that they could not pull the net in. From the voice one of his disciples knew that it was the Lord who had come to be with them. This time 'breakfast' and not supper! Breakfast with Jesus!

And being with Jesus like earlier times the disciples felt their hearts come alive. And they probably felt inner healing. At least Simon Peter who had a personal encounter with Jesus, where instead of denying him three times, Peter was asked to tell Jesus that he loved him three times. Most probably Jesus had a little chat with all of his disciples. He did this before making the next gesture that he was about to leave them and this time for good.

I can imagine how much the disciples would have liked to have Jesus with them for yet many days. They might also have told one another that they had been stupid during the earlier three years not having got to know him much better. Then they would have been so much better prepared for the life and task ahead. But now Jesus was leaving them again. I can imagine that they were wondering what life would be like with Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father, where, by the way, they themselves would have liked to sit. They must have felt really quite 'naked' having been on the run out of fear and now, now, what would they do now?

And this is how Matthew writes about that last time with Jesus.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt. 28.16-20)

Yes, it is so beautiful to read that the disciples had listened to the words of Mary Magdalen and the other Mary, and had gone to Galilee. They had listened to the words of two ladies! Isn't that kind of a surprise? But one thing is for sure. They had been obedient and yes, here they were. Personally I can see how that breakfast was soon turned into a time of worship where the disciples fell on their faces in front of their wonderful Saviour. I wish I could have been there! That would have got life into my prayer life. Eating with Jesus and then worshipping him! What a day to tell my friends about!

But isn't it so typical of us all that in the midst of the glory of Jesus some of his disciples doubted? Did they doubt that 'Jesus has got all authority in heaven and on earth'? Or did they doubt that 'Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age'? Or did they doubt that they would be able

to 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'? They might have doubted all of these. Or maybe they trembled from fear knowing full well that not everybody would receive them gladly. They certainly remembered Jesus having told them this.

But here they were with Jesus, and HE not anybody else had given them himself and with this a job that should be done. What a job to do! It was a bit unreal, as they were far from Jerusalem and other cities and listening to him in the quiet of a lake on a mountain side trying to make sense out of something that Jesus had been hinting all along during those three years that they had spent together. Yes, they suddenly remembered how he'd sent them out two by two preaching and healing and driving out demons. Yes, he certainly had, and they felt like conquerors and this had given Jesus so much joy. But now they must have felt that the task would be something that they couldn't handle. Too much without Jesus right beside them!

But then Jesus adds something, which we all need to remember and remind ourselves about. We can read this in acts, the first chapter and the eighth verse: 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' Yes, this is what those disciples needed to hear and what we need to hear today. 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you!' Jesus didn't leave his disciples alone. He didn't want them to remain in their sadness and doubts. He wanted them to proclaim this Best of News to everybody, yes, to everybody. To do this they needed to experience his Holy Spirit and his power. This would change their lives and the job that Jesus wanted them to do. The Holy Spirit was about to come and change them forever and ever. What an event!

Sorry, but now I am back in my own country again. Almost a hundred years ago thousands of orphans and old widows walked into my city, Aleppo. They had seen violence and death for years on their way from their homes and here they came to city not ready to receive them. There were no churches to receive them either! They were really badly off and humanly speaking they shouldn't have survived. Looking at them they were so filthy and dirty and filled with lice and all kinds of diseases. If it hadn't been for some good missionaries and NGO workers, there wouldn't be any Armenian nation today.

But they all got together and out of these miserable people the Armenian part of Aleppo was built. When they built a hut to live in they also built a hut as a church and another hut as a school. The Armenian nation was reborn and despite incredible hardship this nation flourished and made Aleppo into a centre of education and industry. But now it is

being destroyed once again. What does this really mean? Does it mean that we have kept the Gospel to ourselves? Have past experiences of Genocide and massacres made us into people who don't trust others, for a good reason, maybe, but have we in fact isolated ourselves so that God is trying to get through to us today with today's message?

So does this mean that Jesus today is telling us in the Armenian community in Aleppo and in the whole of Syria to reach out to our brothers and sisters; the one whose house has been destroyed, whose wife and children might have been killed or maimed? Is this what Jesus is telling us today on this Ascension Day? Has Jesus given us yet another opportunity to go and preach to the 'Samaritan' living with us since we first came to Syria? Is he telling us to love them in the same way we love our Lord Jesus Christ? Is Jesus telling us that, 'You Armenians were once a lost as these others are and now is the time for you to act and go to them and see them baptized and taught what it means to be a follower of Jesus;?

Yes, this is what today's text tells me. What does it tell you? Maybe you also need to experience that Ascension Day with the disciples when the church was about to be built. Are you one of the church-builders today? Or have you kept Jesus' message to yourself only?

*The Present Situation and Future Challenges for Christians in Syria*¹²**Haroutune Selimian**

Good Morning! Thanks for your kind invitation! I am happy to be with you and I can honestly tell you that I wasn't sure I'd be able to leave my commitments and to travel. The fighting in my home city, Aleppo, has been so intense that it's been impossible to get out into the streets and the only road out of the city has been closed for days. But in the end I made it and here I am.

I'm proud to be Syrian! I come from a country with a civilization that goes back to the beginning of history. We don't see much of civilization at this moment, and we keep on wondering what has happened to us, to humanity, and to our country. What's gone wrong? Yes, maybe everything! The destruction of the country is as complete as the pictures that you see portray. That part I am not proud of! Whatever we had achieved for long years has gone down the drain. Education was one of the main-stays of our 'former' Syria. People aged 15-24 were mostly literate. Almost every child was at school. Now there are close to four million children without education and more than half of the Syrian children outside our country do not have the chance to attend school. If these children are our future, it is certainly not bright!

When it comes to work, half of the workers are out of work. Unemployment for young people is without statistics and that is why there are so few young people around, if any.

Poverty! Yes, in Syria almost half the population is in need of major financial assistance. And in spite of free hospitalization, as provided by the state, people, psychologically and emotionally, cannot afford seeing anybody go to hospital anymore. Maybe I should add that there are hardly any hospitals left in Aleppo. Yes, what we know is that the life-expectancy has dropped 20 years in five years, that is from 75.9 to 55.6.

My theme is 'The Present Situation and Future Challenges for Christians in Syria'. What I have just told you is the *present situation* and I might even have made it more attractive than it is. At least my fellow Aleppo citizens wouldn't think that I have painted the situation dark enough. Up there it is even darker and getting worse. Yes, I haven't told you that we are without both electricity and water for so long. And when the road letting food into the city is closed, then it gets even worse.

¹² Sermon preached at Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, Sunday May 8, 2016 in the evening.

Well, that's the present situation. Now on to the *future challenges for the Christians of Syria*. As Christians we have been and are an integral part of the Syrian society. Until the beginning of the war, there were Christians in almost every town and city in the country. They had their churches and they were probably more connected to the church than people are in most European countries. As there is often a school attached with the church, this makes it more likely that many Christian parents will send their children to the school and in this way a larger percentage of the Christian population will be in touch with the church.

This was the situation up to five years ago, but it has dramatically changed since. In some towns and cities there has been an ethnic cleansing, something we as Armenians are 'used to'. In most cases the Christians have been able to flee, without most of their possessions but saving their own lives. In some cases, and some have been very much heard of in the West, a large number of Christians have been kidnapped and held for months and months, while others have left with only the clothes on their bodies. Yes, large numbers are still being held hostage.

In two areas of Syria there has been some kind of settlement whereby the Christians have been allowed to come back to their villages. One such area is around the Khabour River in North-Eastern Syria. But few Christians have felt reassured to take up the challenge of going home with the war still raging very close, and with little reason to believe that the 'peace' will last.

The second area is the Armenian Kessab, which was taken over two years ago and held for three months. Once retaken, people found that most churches had been burnt and destroyed and almost all shops ransacked and many houses ransacked and destroyed. Few people have had the means to fix up their houses. The situation is still desperate and most young people see no future in their home area and wonder what to do.

But these are two 'good stories' among many bad ones. It can be said that all large Christian villages have been attacked. You have probably heard of Maaloula, which is still much of a ghost city, and where most citizens wonder if it's at all worth trying to go home. What if it all happens again? Who to trust, for how long?

Saydnaya, a large town between Maaloula and Damascus, has survived so far, as the population has taken it upon itself to defend themselves and their town physically. Actually the local defence forces have not allowed any other military force to get close. In Saydnaya you find one of the largest Christian monasteries in the Middle East. It looks like a citadel towering over the town. Many prayers for safety have been uttered behind these walls during the last 1,500 years. Yes, this is not the first threat to this area of the country. 'Nothing new under the sun!'

I could go on and tell you about other towns that have been under siege. In these towns and villages, all kinds of atrocities have taken place, and there might not be a single Christian left today. Until recently they lived normal lives in daily contact with people from other religious backgrounds and in matter of days this communal living, this living side by side, this co-existence has come to an end. Childhood friendships simply don't exist anymore. There is suddenly a knife, or maybe a Kalashnikov, between old friends. What a horrible outcome of a war, where the result is that everybody suffers, and suffers in a most brutal way!

Yes, the challenges are already there and most of them are a matter of survival. At this very moment as I am penning these lines, the big guns are being operated sowing death and destruction in our midst. The terrible noise they make is enough to make you tremble. And we can hear the screams when they fall on a building and yet more people have been killed or maimed. These days the church bells keep on ringing, calling people to funerals. Old people, young people and children won't be alive to see tomorrow.

In all of this you find the church. Yes, the church is still there and it's functioning. Maybe more the way that most of you would like it to be. Not only holding services and inviting people to meet Christ in a building. No, the church in our country has had to go to the people like so many times before in its history.

Now I will talk a little bit about the Armenian Church, as this is the Church that I am mostly familiar with. Yes, there is a church in Aleppo belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church, which was built during the seventeenth century, but most of the Armenian churches were built less than a hundred years ago right after the Armenian Genocide, where Aleppo became one of the last places of deportation, where Armenian orphans came in their thousands together with grandmothers. Yes, our church and the Armenian people were resurrected in Aleppo, Syria. It was built by orphans and grandmothers and it would take me the whole evening to tell you what a miracle that rebirth was.

They built their own part of the city. When they built, they named each area after the city or town they had come from in Turkey, such as Marash, Sassoun, Hajin or Sis, and in each one of those areas they first built a church and then a school. So wherever you go in the Armenian areas you will in most cases find a church and a school next door.

After 15 years of building the Armenians had to leave the first area and move to another area, as they were told that they had to give the land back. So the Armenian areas, which have been bombed, and bombed almost daily for the last four years, were built in the late 1930s and during the Second World War when the Armenians together with all other

Syrians once more suffered incredibly. At that time they were also wondering if they would make it through without losing it all.

Yes, they did make it through. And they even prospered and gave me and my generation a part of Aleppo, which we are proud of. A place with many churches and schools, hospitals and clubs and theatres, yes, more theatres than the government has built in the whole country. And until today you will find theatre groups practising, choirs singing, and schools being run, as if there was no war. Do not ask me how all this continues, as this is equal to a miracle.

The whole Armenian community has been mobilized to take care of their own as well as others in need. The heads of the three Armenian church communities, the Armenian Apostolic, the Armenian Catholic and the Armenian Evangelical, or Protestant, have done their utmost to see that life defeats death. Armenian communities have been working hard at keeping the Armenians of Syria alive and well enough to help others. Three years ago in my own church we saw the need for a dispensary and during one of the worst rounds of fighting we started it up and it has been going ever since. Do I need to tell you that there are many coming for help?

As a church we also run a music conservatory with the best teachers. This doesn't sound right, does it? But we believe that at this moment we as a church must be mobilized and create an almost 'normal' atmosphere to counter the traumas that people are battling with. Yes, sometimes we think that there are more activities now than during the days of peace, but this is just to say that we work real hard.

We meet the challenges right on. This doesn't mean that people are staying in the country. The only thing we can tell people is: 'The church is here to stay! It's not leaving!' But can we blame families when they have lost everything they had, including the factory that they had invested so much in, their bombed out house and their car, which was parked under the building. Such people will say, 'I've lost everything, but I'm not willing to gamble with the lives of my wife and children. They are more precious than everything I've owned.'

As a community we will always continue to work for peace and co-existence. We have experienced it before and we believe that we can start living together again. It will take an effort, but as a person believing that the Bible is the Word of God I do believe that we as Christians are made for this kind of situation! This is the time when we can really test our faith! Once peace reigns we will need a lot of this faith to rebuild what has been torn down and replace what has been false with truth and decide to live trusting the others for good, and make them know that we are there for them and they are there for us. It will take all of our Christian virtues, but Syria is worth the challenge and we will never give up.