

Dire Times For Iraq's Christians

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(CBS) From the time of Jesus, there have been Christians in what is now Iraq. The Christian community took root there after the Apostle Thomas headed east. But now, after nearly 2,000 years, Iraqi Christians are being hunted, murdered and forced to flee -- persecuted on a biblical scale in Iraq's religious civil war. You'd have to be mad to hold a Christian service in Iraq today, but if you must, then the vicar of Baghdad is your man. He's the Reverend Canon Andrew White, an Anglican chaplain who suffers from multiple sclerosis and from a fanatical determination to save the last Iraqi Christians from the purge. White invited 60 Minutes cameras and correspondent Scott Pelley to an underground Baghdad church service for what's left of his congregation. White's parishioners are risking their lives to celebrate their faith.

"The room is full of children, it's full of women, but I don't see the men. Where are they?" Pelley remarked.

"They are mainly killed. Some are kidnapped. Some are killed. In the last six months things have got particularly bad for the Christians. Here in this church, all of my leadership were originally taken and killed," White explained. "All dead. But we never got their bodies back. This is one of the problems. I regularly do funerals here but it's not easy to get the bodies."

Many Iraqi Christians' churches are destroyed or abandoned. The congregation is smuggled in and out of this secret sanctuary. Even letting 60 Minutes come to the service was a terrible risk. White is among the last Christian ministers here, a savior with crosses to bear. Larger than life, stricken with MS, and by his own reckoning, driven a little bit mad.

He was first sent to Baghdad by the Archbishop of Canterbury nine years ago, well before the Christian persecution.

"You were here during Saddam's reign. And now after. Which was better? Which was worse?" Pelley asked.

"The situation now is clearly worse" than under Saddam, White replied.

"There's no comparison between Iraq now and then," he told Pelley. "Things are the most difficult they have ever been for Christians. Probably ever in history. They've never known it like now."

"Wait a minute, Christians have been here for 2,000 years," Pelley remarked.

"Yes," White said.

"And it's now the worst it has ever been," Pelley replied.

To understand the history of Iraqi Christianity, start with the Last Supper. One saint to the right of Jesus is the Apostle Thomas, who took the gospel and headed east after the death of Christ.

In modern times, under Saddam, Christians were treated much the same as Muslims; Saddam's right hand man, Tariq Aziz, was Christian.

Before the war, it's estimated there were about a million Christians in Iraq. They were a small minority, but free to worship, free to build churches, and free to speak the ancient language of Jesus, Aramaic. But, after the invasion, Muslim militants launched a war on each other and the cross.

On Sunday, Aug. 1, 2004, five churches were bombed. The Iraqi Christian community, which had survived invasions by Mongols and Turks, was driven out under American occupation. No one can be sure, but Canon White estimates most of Iraq's Christians have fled or been killed. Those still here are too old, too ill or too poor to run.

"Why are you feeding them all?" Pelley asked.

"Because, this is the only decent meal they'll have in the week," White explained. "They can't afford food. So we're just moving from every other week to every week because they've got nothing."

Nothing for many, not even their families. The 60 Minutes team was confronted with one of many stories of depravity as the congregation left.

"Outside the church service this gentleman put these pictures in my hand. I can't show you the pictures. They're just too much. They're pictures of his children. His daughter who was 15 years old. And his son who was about four years old. They've both been shot in the head," Pelley said.

His children were killed, the father said, because he ran a liquor store. Liquor stores are typically Christian businesses here, legal, except under the Islamic street justice that rules since the invasion.

"So I hear stories of shootings, death, torturing, kidnapping, mutilation. I hear it all," White told Pelley.

The people with those stories once lived in a neighborhood called Dora, where Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites had lived together. 60 Minutes wanted to see what happened there so, we took a ride with U.S. Army Colonel Rick Gibbs. His men picked Pelley and the team up under a rusting relic of Saddam's tyranny, a parade archway made of two enormous swords, and from there they headed to ethnic cleansing's "ground zero."

"We have 13 churches. None of them are operational," Col. Gibbs said.

Asked if this was the worst neighborhood in town, Gibbs said, "It's the toughest neighborhood in town."

Gibbs commands the 4th Brigade, 1st Infantry Division out of Fort Riley, Kan. In Dora, he set up a combat outpost in an abandoned Catholic seminary.

"I was at a secret church service yesterday. A man came up to me and handed me some photographs of his children. They'd been shot to death. Somebody had come by their house and murdered his children because they were Christians. What are you seeing?" Pelley asked Gibbs.

"I don't see a lot of that anymore. But when we first arrived we saw lots of that. We have 500 a month.

That's what we were tracking," the colonel replied. "It would not surprise my soldiers to walk down a street on a patrol and see three or four bodies laying in the street with a bullet behind their head."

U.S. forces do not protect the churches. There's a hands-off policy for all religious sites and Gibbs says there's another reason.

"The Christians do not want us to guard the churches openly," he said.

Why wouldn't the Christians want Gibbs and his soldiers to protect the churches?

"They feel that if we are overtly protecting the churches that someone underground covertly will come in and murder the Christians because they're collaborating with the U.S. forces," Gibbs explained.

There seems to be less violence now in part because of the surge of U.S. forces but also because the purge of Christians from Dora is largely complete. Gibbs says Islamic militants are on the run now.

"We hear that through our intelligence sources on the ground people telling us they're running that's how we knew to come down here with our next big fight to keep getting after them," Gibbs said, as shots could be heard in the background. "And that's what you hear over there is us in that fight trying to go get them."

60 Minutes wanted to see one church that had been destroyed but Gibbs couldn't take us there -- roadside bombs blocked the way. So he walked us over to a church next to his combat outpost. Because of the proximity, it hadn't been looted. In fact, it hadn't been touched by anyone for a very long time.

"This is one of the abandoned churches of Dora," Pelley remarked inside the church. "It looks like it was left suddenly and completely. There's a fine coat of dust over everything in the church. It was all left just as it was. One of the reasons these churches have been abandoned is in this letter, a letter that went out to the neighborhoods of Dora about a year ago. It reads like this: 'To the Christian, we would like to inform you of the decision of the legal court of the Secret Islamic Army to notify you that this is the last and final threat. If you do not leave your home, your blood will be spilled.' And in case there was any chance that anyone would not get the message, the letter ends like this: 'You and your family will be killed.'"

Pelley talked to a young man, a Baghdad Christian, whose name we cannot use. He told Pelley that after the invasion, posters appeared near his home.

"They were like telling us that Christians were against Islam, that we're infidels, that women shouldn't drive and a woman that doesn't wear a scarf would get her head cut off," the man told Pelley. "And I thought, 'What, are we going back to the Middle Ages?'"

He told us his family began going to Mass in shifts. Asked why, he told Pelley, "If like the church gets bombed on like one of the Masses, so like half of the family will be there and half will be safe."

Ultimately, the church was bombed.

Asked what has become of the people he used to worship with in that church, the young man told Pelley, "I simply don't know. A lot of them are in Syria. I don't know any of 'em that stayed in Baghdad."

His family, unharmed, fled to neighboring Jordan. But most Christians ran north to Syria where they've filled a Damascus neighborhood. Knock on any door and you'll find a story.

"They threatened this young girl," one woman told 60 Minutes. "They want her to become a Muslim. The boy is in danger of being kidnapped. My other boy is in danger of being kidnapped because we're

Christians."

Another woman was on a bus outside Baghdad, when gunmen boarded and demanded to know her husband's faith. "They told him, 'How come you have not embraced Islam yet?' He said, 'To each his own religion,'" she recalled.

"He told him 'I am a Christian.' He told him to get off the bus," a child added.

And they never saw him again. Christian refugees are now swept up in an exodus of historic proportions. The U.N. estimates more than four million Iraqis of all faiths are running from the war. The United States has promised to help, but so far about 2,000 Iraqis have been allowed into the U.S., less than one tenth of one percent of all the refugees.

Those who remain in Iraq are bound together by a particular kind of faith known only to those under siege.

Why is this happening?

"It's happening because religion has gone wrong," Canon White told Pelley. "And when religion goes wrong, it kills others."

"Some of your parishioners must ask you, 'Why is God allowing this to happen to us?'" Pelley asked.

"To them I say, 'God is with you and he is with me and I am with you and I'm not going away,'" White replied.

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