

Archbishop of Westminster urges people to think of Christians who suffer for their faith in Christmas Midnight Mass



Archbishop Vincent Nichols: 'We must not

forget our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters'

The most senior Catholic in England and Wales has told followers to pray for Christians in the Middle East, where even going to church is 'an act of life-risking bravery'.

The Archbishop of Westminster warned of the dangers to Christians in Egypt, Iraq and Syria, all dogged by religious violence.

The Most Rev Vincent Nichols added Christianity 'was literally born in the Middle East' as he

delivered Midnight Mass to worshippers in London's Westminster Cathedral.

The homily echoes comments by Prince Charles last week as he visited Coptic and Syrian Orthodox communities now living in London and Hertfordshire.

Coptic Christians in Egypt make up a tenth of the population but have faced sectarian violence since the ousting of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi in July.

About a tenth of Syrians are Christian, too - but with the country in the thick of a brutal civil war, minorities feel increasingly threatened.

The Archbishop said: 'Christians are the most widely persecuted religious group in the world today and this evening we think especially of the Middle East, especially of Egypt, Iraq and Syria.'

'As Prince Charles said last week: "Christianity was literally born in the Middle East and we must not forget our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters."

'We come to this Cathedral this evening freely and relatively easily, ready to give a simple act of witness to our faith.'

'But for many going to church is an act of life-risking bravery. We thank them and seek to be inspired by their courageous faith.'

The Prince of Wales hit out last week at the way Christians were targeted by fanatics in the Middle East.

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Archbishop of Canterbury to use first Christmas Day sermon to highlight 'injustices' facing Britain's poor and victims of conflicts around the world

Christians in Britain feel pressure to be 'silent about their faith', warns former Archbishop of Canterbury

He claimed bridges between Christianity and Islam were being 'deliberately destroyed' by people with vested interests.

'For 20 years I have tried to build bridges between Islam and Christianity to dispel ignorance and misunderstanding,' he told a reception for Middle East Christians at Clarence House, London.

'The point though surely is that we have now reached a crisis where bridges are rapidly being deliberately destroyed by those with a vested interest in doing so.'

'This is achieved through intimidation, false accusation and organised persecution including to the

Christian communities in the Middle East.'

Archbishop Nicols also echoed Pope Francis in reflecting upon hope and tenderness.

He said at 'this pivotal moment we know how much healing we need'.

He added: 'We know how much we need to repair and strengthen the bond of our universal brotherhood, our common humanity so that everywhere and always we see each other as a brother and a sister, children of a common Father who loves each one as much as every other and asks us to do likewise.'

He told followers to have hope, adding: 'This is so important as of ourselves we can easily lose heart. But God always open doors for us, he never closes them.

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'He opens the doors of compassion, mercy and forgiveness that we can lift up our heads again and go forward in hope of his unswerving love.

'He says: "do not be afraid of tenderness". In the helpless of the babe we see God so close to us, in such precarious circumstances, asking us not only to trust ourselves to him but also to express ourselves to him with all the gentleness and tenderness that is in our hearts.

'This is the Lord of love who invites us into a relationship of love. And in all our loving, we show our own vulnerability and joy in the tenderness we have for each other. So too it is with the Lord, as this night makes so clear.'

Up to 1,500 Roman Catholics were expected to attend the service in the Edwardian-era cathedral, which serves as the principal church for the estimated 5.8 million Catholics in England and Wales.

Archbishop Nichols was appointed in 2009 after nine years as the Archbishop of Birmingham and is the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

He came to the role pledging to tackle thorny issues plaguing the church, like historic child abuse,

head-on. In 2010 he said shame was 'not enough', adding: 'The abuse of children is a grievous sin against God.'

Dan Bloom - The Mail