

We continue to hear about the plight of Paul and Barnabas. 'This time, some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium, and turned the people against the apostles. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the town, thinking he was dead.'

Paul and Barnabas wanted people to encounter Jesus and experience themselves the liberating power of God's love. But, their missionary endeavours met with strenuous opposition. We are hardly surprised that Christians who saw what was happening were losing heart and felt discouraged.

In our country, nobody beats or stones us for our religious beliefs. In the worst scenario, a friend may give us a stony look if we say we go to mass on Sunday or someone on the train may hit us verbally for 'belonging to Pell's club.' If you are a priest, it's a guarantee that someone will call you 'paedophile'. Labels like that are hurtful and make us feel very despondent.

Yesterday, I watched 'Philomena', a true story drama about an Irish woman who was sent by her father to an institution run by the Magdalene sisters for unwed mothers. After giving birth, she was forced to work in the laundry for four years, with little contact with her son. Eventually, the nuns gave her boy up for adoption without giving Philomena a chance to say goodbye. Fifty years later, when Philomena tried to find her son, the nuns once again treated her callously, telling her a pack of lies.

It pains us to be treated disrespectfully by people who do not understand our faith. But it hurts beyond measure to be treated badly or unjustly by your own church. In Australia, we have heard of numerous instances where, in the past, our church institutions failed the people. As a result, we, our friends, or our family members may feel discouraged, lose heart, or even consider giving up the faith.

At Lystra, the Apostles “put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith. ‘We all have to experience many hardships’ they said ‘before we enter the kingdom of God.’

These words are also for us, for these times. How much we need someone to put fresh heart into us. How much we need someone to pour new encouragement into our hearts. How much we need someone to give us strength to persevere when things are rough.

Let’s ask the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to come and renew us in spirit. May he let us encounter the risen Lord and fill us with new hope. Finally, may he enable us to be encouragement for each other when we experience many hardships.