

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

New Guinea Martyrs

5 September 2021

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“Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” some Greeks said to Philip. Philip and Andrew then go to tell Jesus, and instead of simply saying, “Bring them in,” Jesus starts a long discourse about all sorts of things which do not seem to have very much to do with letting these Greeks see him.

One presumes that Jesus had acquired quite a reputation and it is hardly surprising that as his fame spread so the desire and enthusiasm to meet him grew. Yet, from the very beginning ‘seeing’ is one of the key words in John’s Gospel.

When the first disciples are pointed towards Jesus by John the Baptist, they ask him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” and Jesus says, “Come and see” – which is the same as saying ‘come and understand’. In John, seeing and hearing are the ways people come to believe or trust in Jesus, and to recognise his unity and singleness of purpose with God, the Creator and Ruler of everything.

But the Greeks do not get to see him and instead the narrative leads to an address to the disciples by Jesus. He foretells a time after his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In other words, others will emerge, the fruit of the seed, whose witness will similarly be seen and become the grounds for faith.

In light of the reality of constant persecution, Tertullian, a third century theologian, took this reasoning further and maintained that ‘the blood of the saints is the seeds of the church’ and to this I shall add: the faith of the saints is the fabric of the church.

The third century Christian theologian Origen is reputed in his youth to have sought martyrdom with his father. If the story is to be believed, it was only his mother that stopped him. She took his clothes and hid them so that he had to stay at home rather than go out to meet the lions. Initially, after his death Origen was declared to be a saint, but memories soured subsequently. He was declared to be a heretic in the century that followed. Becoming part of what might one describe as the fabric or the substance of the church certainly has its ups and downs.

Today we celebrate the feast day of the Martyrs in New Guinea, wherein we remember those missionaries and workers who were killed at the time of the Japanese invasion of Papua. You will notice that I have used ‘in’ and not ‘of’, and I shall come back to that later.

Twelve martyrs are known and named: Mavis Parkinson, May Hayman, Henry Holland, Margaret Brenchley, Lilla Lashmar, Vivian Redlich, John Duffil, Lucian Tapiedi, Henry Matthews, Leslie Gariadi, John Barge and Bernard Moore; but of course there were missionaries from other denominations and a number of other local Papua New Guineans who protected and supported the missionaries who also lost their lives.

Although I knew the basic outline of the story of the World War II Martyrs in PNG, I must admit that it was only when I joined the staff of the Anglican Board of Mission in the 1990s that I began to appreciate its profound impact on the broader Anglican Church in Australia. The Martyrs have been and remain part of the DNA of ABM, which is hardly surprising given its role in facilitating mission overseas and its direct engagement with most of these particular missionaries.

Their story inspired others who sought to follow in their footsteps and to continue the work which they had begun. Many responded, often through ABM, and in fairness those who both preceded and succeeded the twelve missionaries named today, also deserve recognition. Some died or had partners or children die, some became chronically ill, others found it extremely difficult to settle back into the culture which had previously been home for them. I have rarely met a missionary whose service did not entail some level of cost and sacrifice.

But then there was the majority who did not feel called to this form of service and found other ways to respond. The story of the Martyrs captured the hearts and the imaginations of many. In my travels throughout the Australian Church over the years I have preached in churches and chapels which are dedicated to the martyrs in an array of locations, some quite unexpected, and I have noted countless stain glass windows, plaques, banners and other forms of memorial along the way.

Many of these remembrances date from the two decades following the end of the War, when there were numerous people throughout the Church who had personal links with the missionaries who had been killed. Shock, grief, admiration and a desire to honour faithful and selfless service found many ways to express itself.

Most of these memorials remain and the commitment to remember continues to be focussed in annual commemorations around the Church in the first week in September. Yet, with the passing of time the personal contacts diminish – those who actually knew the Martyrs have become those who knew someone who actually knew the Martyrs, and the story itself has begun to be passed down and to take on a more historical feel. Sadly, the commemoration services have also become smaller, which leads some to ask, who will remember, when we are gone?

But before we become too despairing, let me suggest that there is a healthy aspect to this process which in essence refurbishes the tradition of the church and replenishes its fabric into the future. Let me also suggest that at this moment in time we remain custodians of important memories and we continue to shape the emerging tradition as to the worth and legacy of the of the Martyrs. Let me illustrate this a little for you with two stories.

In early June I had the opportunity to make a visit to the parish of St Alban's Epping. While there, I learnt that the parish, which has a significant memorial to the Martyrs, was proposing to add a mounted PNG tribal necklace to the existing memorial and was seeking approval from the congregation. I hasten to add that it was no ordinary necklace.

Some of you may be aware, that not all the remains of the slain missionaries were accounted for after World War II. In particular, there was a mystery surrounding the final resting place of the Rev'd Vivian Redlich. Rumours had circulated for some time that the whereabouts were known, but, as one bishop told me, there was too much blame and shame, for the remains to be returned. Included in the rumour was an acknowledgement that this missionary had actually been killed not by the Japanese but by local people. While this may have shocked Australians, it also shocked Papua New Guineans.

Even more concerning was the fact that the blame and shame was playing into postcolonial sentiments which are emerging within PNG and also the church, with the consequence it diminished both the Martyrs and their legacy. I have had several conversations with younger PNG leaders where I have been informed that ten of the Martyrs were not Papua New Guineans and should not be referred to in that way!

Both the Anglican Church of PNG and ABM realised that time was running out. Patrick Redlich, Vivian's brother was elderly and so too, were the surviving members of the community who had been present at the time of the death. Without reconciliation and closure this issue had the potential to fester and undermine the critical relationship between the two churches.

Largely through the mediation of the Church in PNG a reconciliation process was instituted which finally brought closure for Patrick Redlich, and members of the community who had lived with the shame for several generations. The necklace was one of a number of reconciliation gifts given to Patrick, some of which he had bestowed on parishes which had a strong connection with the Martyrs.

In the pew sheet at St Alban's this year, the story of Vivian's death was finally reported honestly, and the necklace will become a sign of healing and of a maturing relationship with the Church in Papua New Guinea, which in itself is the greatest legacy of the Martyrs.

And my second story:

About five years ago I was encouraged by a parish priest in Melbourne to visit a priest living in retirement who expressed an interest in speaking to me about a bequest to support work in Papua New Guinea. I discovered that I knew him from my previous ministry in Melbourne and duly made arrangements to see him on my next visit.

The visit became one of several that I made until his death in 2019. Over that time, I learnt that a substantial bequest was intended and that, although he was a relatively wealthy person, he had decided to act as a steward of the resources which had been a gift to him

from his parents. In seeking to make this bequest, he wished no acknowledgement for himself but would only like the memory of his parents to be honoured.

There was one more element within the proposed gift which stood out. It was intended for the Anglican Church in PNG, to be used solely for its church work and capacity needs and he was looking to ABM to partner with the church to ensure this would happen. He recognised that without helping the church to have critical skills and theological training it would struggle to do much of its other work.

I wondered why he was so passionate in his desire to support the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea. His response was very simple – he felt that both PNG and the Anglican Church in PNG had been short-changed by the rapid departure to ensure an independence timetable. He proceeded to quote the line from Tertullian with which I began and added the Martyrs of PNG did their bit so perhaps I can help with the fabric.

ABM has received confirmation of the gift and will continue with the tradition of its stewardship, seeking support from the Church in Australia to increase its annual value for the work of the Church in PNG, thereby continuing to recognise the greatest legacy of the Martyrs and their fellow missionaries.