

ST MARK'S CHURCH, SOUTH HURSTVILLE, NSW

Sermon for the Commemoration of the New Guinea Martyrs

4 September 2021

'The White-robed Army of Martyrs Praise You'

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Readings: Wisdom 3: 1-9; Psalm 31: 1-8; Matthew 10: 16-22.

Martyrs in Time and Space

For most of us living in the comfort of our western, liberal, democratic societies, martyrdom is not something that we encounter often. For us, it tends to be something that happened in the past when religious conflict dominated the world, or perhaps a result of cultural conflict that arose from the work of missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Nevertheless, martyrdom does continue in our own times. High profile twentieth century martyrs include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr, and Janani Luwum. It also includes the lesser-known martyrs of New Guinea whom we commemorate today. Yet, recent events in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and many parts of the Middle East and North Africa are still seeing the deaths of people because of their religious convictions.

So, what do martyrs look like and what motivates them? Let us go and make a visit.

The scene is the middle of the second century AD in the ancient city of Smyrna, now known as Izmir in Turkey. An old man is tied to a stake and burnt. His crime was that he did not recognise the emperor as God.

He was a popular man in the community and a leader of the Christian church. Because of this, the local political leaders had pleaded with him to recognise the emperor and live. All he had to do was cast a pinch in incense into a fire.

The old man was **Polycarp**, Bishop of Smyrna, and he is recorded as responding to his accusers at his trial:

"How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."

This was the typical image of the early church martyr: heroic, resolute, and one whose death paralleled that of Jesus. It was a death in defiance of those in power who claimed more than they were entitled. It was likewise the type of martyrdom that Tertullian envisioned in his statement *“that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”*

In a supreme act of irony, as time passed, Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire and a new type of martyrdom developed - the one who died in defence of the church against those who would harm it.

The poet and playwright T. S. Eliot presented the twelfth century Archbishop of Canterbury, **Thomas Becket**, as facing a quandary over martyrdom. The play presents three tempters who come offering Thomas a life of pleasure, of worldly wealth and power, and of ultimate control by overthrowing the King in a coup. Like Jesus, Thomas rejects them all.

Then comes a fourth tempter, which is Thomas himself. This temptation centres on the exercise of spiritual power over the King by threatening him with eternal damnation. He is encouraged to become a martyr so that he can ‘rule from the grave’. For Thomas, this creates a great dilemma; should he become a self-made martyr to gain spiritual power for the church? Eliot then has him utter the famous words:

*“The last temptation is the greatest treason:
to do the right thing for the wrong reason.”*

Eliot’s Thomas has an existential concern with the purity of motivation over that of action - a twentieth century take on a medieval martyr, full of angst.

The idea of martyrdom arose again with the **Reformation**, and on both sides of the argument. In England there was the martyrdom of **Thomas More** on the one hand and of **Thomas Cranmer** on the other, depending on who was in power at the time. In Sixteenth century England, John Foxe published his *Book of Martyrs* to support the Protestant cause. The Roman Catholic Church responded with the canonisation of a plethora of English martyr-saints on the other.

Nevertheless, the violence meted out upon those who died for their faith on both sides of the Christian divide was the same. This was a different type of martyrdom from that of either the early church or the middle-ages. These were often nationalist saints who died for political causes in a power struggle involving Christian against Christian.

I’m pleased to note that in 2008 a memorial was erected in the University Church of St Mary, Oxford to the martyrs of the Reformation who died on both sides of the religious divide and who had an association with that place. It was a moment of corporate maturity to recognise that the death of any single martyr diminishes the whole – your martyrs and now our martyrs as well.

Wars of religion, however, lead to a point of ambiguity in the idea of the Christian martyr. Do these people choose martyrdom or is it something inflicted upon them? Moreover, while martyrdom may be about faithfulness, the question remains: what is it in which one has faith? And does one need to have pure motives?

More recently, political martyrs who seek to assert party spirit, or ideology, or terror are certainly of a different category to those of the early church who sought to follow Christ, even to the cross. Indeed, the measure of any martyr has to be their faithfulness to Christ and their capacity to take up their cross and follow him with integrity.

Be Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves

Chapter ten in the Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus sending his closest disciples to minister to “the lost sheep of Israel” proclaiming that the “kingdom of heaven has come near!”. In doing this he authorises them to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons”. In other words, to do what Jesus himself had been doing. Having given the Twelve their instructions, Jesus warned them of the threats that they would face in the work of proclaiming the Kingdom, which is the passage read for us today.

The phrase ‘be wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ is a typical aphorism of Jesus’ time, being a proverbial saying based upon something in nature. Jesus was saying to the apostles ‘be thoughtful and perceptive in what you do but also be free of malice and guile’. It is a recognition that the apostles will not be in control of their circumstances but nevertheless need to act with integrity and faithfulness.

Of course, this was a message not only to the apostles, but also to the people of the church connected with the Gospel of Matthew. It was a church that faced persecution, and the words of Jesus were designed to help them to understand and find encouragement in the face of such sufferings; even beyond death.

The gospel passage continues beyond today’s reading to describe an apocalyptic world of violence, betrayal, and persecution. This is not dissimilar to what we see in current conflicts and pogroms where life is held cheap and what passes for law is that which is done at the point of a gun. It was similar in 70AD during the Roman-Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew’s community were trying to make sense of their own world and find hope in the face of possible annihilation.

Following the Cross

As it was for the disciples and the early church, so it is for us when following Christ; there are moments when we face the challenges of doubt and discouragement. For some, there will be times of confrontation, marginalisation, and persecution. And for a few there will come the possibility of death at the hands of others. These are moments

of decision about what matters, where our lives might go, and what we hold on to for support. It is the testing of our faith.

New Guinea in 1942 was caught up in the chaos of the Second World War. It was an apocalyptic moment for much of the world, and it was especially for those missionaries, both Anglican and other Christians, who found themselves in the face of the advancing Japanese Army. A decision had to be made – to fight, to stay, or to flee.

‘Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ - the Anglican missionaries who decided to stay with their people knew that they would not be in control of their circumstances but nevertheless chose to be faithful to their calling. In doing so they faced the betrayal, terror, and violence that comes in the fog of war.

Theirs was a martyrdom that came from seeking to follow Jesus by serving the needs of the people with whom they had been bound. They were caught up in events that surrounded them, and which eventually swallowed them up.

Their deaths were not political or ideological on their part, nor did they involve grand statements of faith before witnesses. To some, they were the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time, but what they demonstrated was a pastoral heart that was self-sacrificing in the face of danger. Motivated by love for their people and seeking to follow Christ they remained, becoming martyrs for our own times.