

THE NEW GUINEA MARTYRS

Sermon by Canon Farnham E. Maynard

ST. PETER'S, MELBOURNE. OCTOBER 11, 1942. 7.30 P.M.

“Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life.” (Rev. ii.10.)

Of the New Guinea Mission Staff:

James Benson, priest, Sister May Hayman, and Mavis Parkinson have been killed; probably Sep. 1st. Vivian Redlich, priest, John Duffield, Margaret Brenchley, and Lila Lashmar have been taken captive.

To these we must add the name of Henry Matthews, priest, likewise a victim of the war and of his faithfulness to the cause of Christ in Papua.

It was probably on September 1st last that three Missionaries of the Bishop's staff in New Guinea paid with their lives for their faithfulness to Christ and to the people to whom they had been sent.

Of the exact manner and place of their death no statement is yet available. The official report is that they were annihilated.

As soon as Japan came into the war it was realised that the Missionaries on the north east coast of Papua would be in extreme peril. The Governmental authorities rightly made this very clear to them and told them they could not afford them protection, urging them to leave the Mission and fly to safety while there was time.

It was with a full sense of the risk and the responsibility that lay upon them that the Bishop and his staff determined to stay by their people come what might. It was a serious decision to make. No one could have made it for them. No one could have told them, from the comparative safety of Australia, that it was their duty to stay. No one but those on the spot could have estimated the importance to the natives of their withdrawal or refusal to fly.

It was with much prayer that the decision was come to; and it was unanimous. The Bishop and his staff were convinced that it was God's will that they should not desert their people in the hour of danger.

Let me remind you of the brave words of the Bishop at the end of last January when the decision was taken:—

“My brothers and sisters, fellow-workers in Christ, whatever others may do we cannot leave. We shall not leave. We shall stay by our trust. We shall stand by our vocation. We do not know what it may mean to us. Many already think us fools and mad. What does that matter! If we are fools, we are fools for Christ's sake. I cannot foretell the future. I cannot guarantee all will be well — that we shall all come through unscathed.

“One thing only I can guarantee is that if we do not forsake Christ present here in His Body in Papua, the Church, He will not forsake us. He will uphold us; He will sustain us; He will strengthen us and He will guide and keep us through the days that lie ahead.

“If we left all, it would take years for the Church to recover from our betrayal of trust. If we remain — and even if the worst came to the worst and we all were to perish in remaining — the Church would not perish, for there would have been no breach of trust within its walls, but its foundation and structure would have received added strength for the future building by our faithfulness unto death.”

..... “We have made our resolution to stay. Let us not shrink from it. Let us not go back on it. Let us trust and not be afraid.”

That was said at the end of January when the decision had to be taken. You will see that there was no misunderstanding of the risks, or blindness to the possibility of total destruction as far as this world is concerned.

It was a decision taken in the light of eternal realities, such as the Christian only understands.

There comes to mind the saying of Jesus: “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel’s, the same shall save it.” (Mark 8,35.)

These three Missionaries have, beyond all doubt, entered into the promise of the Lord: “Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel’s, the same shall save it.”

For what conceivable reason did they stay in that place of peril except for Christ’s sake and the Gospel’s? Deliberately, and of choice, they remained to face the risks, known risks, great risks. For the sake of Christ and His Cause, for the sake of the native Christians, for the sake of the heathen yet to be won for Christ, in order that Christians might not be put to shame, and the seed sown perish. For the sake of faithfulness they faced death; and Christ accepted their offering and crowned it with the glory of total sacrifice.

It is well for us to be clear beyond all mistake that those who follow the Crucified are not guaranteed immunity from suffering, or from what the world counts disaster. “Whosoever would be my disciple”, He says, “let him take up his cross and follow me.”

“The Son of God goes forth to war”— and in that war His soldiers often lose their lives. He said it would be so. But everyone who dies in that cause is more than conqueror. His triumph never dies. The paean of praise that ascends to God for the faithfulness of the Confessors and Martyrs of Christ never ceases.

How often have we in the Church sung of the triumph of the saints of God! How often have we praised God for their constancy unto death! Perhaps we have been too far removed from the events we commemorated to have realised the reverse side of all that. The triumph of the saints has, it may be, blinded us to the dark earth side of their victory.

II. I want to take your thoughts back a bit to link up these latest deaths with the deaths of the Christian heroes of former ages which we commemorate year by year in the Church’s calendar.

These latest victims died in the cause of the spread and maintenance of the Gospel, in a heathen land to which they had gone for the one purpose of spreading the knowledge of God and Christ.

They were doing just what the early Christians were doing, what the Apostles did and those who came after them in the old days of the Roman Empire.

For three long centuries it was not safe to be a Christian. None but God knows how many gave their lives for Christ’s sake and the Gospel’s. It was a very large number. Before the end of the first century, in the book of the Revelation, St. John had seen in his vision the “woman” (representing the evil spirit of the world) “drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus.”

“I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” (Rev. 17,6.)

“The martyrs of Jesus”! What a wonderful sound it has — “The martyrs of Jesus”! Do you wonder that at times men and women coveted to be numbered in that glorious roll of witnesses?

At first the word ‘martyr’ meant just that, ‘a witness’. Very soon the word was restricted to those who witnessed at the risk of their lives. Then the witnesses were further divided into those who were prepared to die for their faith but who, suffering torture or imprisonment, escaped the final penalty of death. These were called *Confessors*; and very brave men and women they often were. While the term ‘martyr’ was reserved for those whom God allowed to serve Him by their deaths. We cannot say that they were more brave or more worthy than others who were not slain. We need not make

comparisons of courage or merit. Perhaps we should make great mistakes if we did. Enough for us to recognize and honour those whom God has uniquely crowned with the permission to die for Christ's sake.

Undoubtedly amongst the martyrs there is to be found a great difference in degree of heroism. Undoubtedly some Confessors suffered far more than many martyrs. Undoubtedly it may cost more to serve faithfully in life than to accept death in swift decision. Not all the saints are martyrs. The Blessed Virgin was not a martyr. St. Athanasius and St. John Chrysostom who both risked martyrdom several times were not martyred. St. Augustine was not a martyr, and the St. Augustine who brought the Faith to England was not a martyr. Many of the greatest saints were not called upon thus to glorify God; though they were ready to do so.

The term 'martyr' belongs to those who willingly jeopardized their lives for the sake of faithfulness to Christ, and whose offering was accepted and sealed by their deaths. We cannot doubt that He who allowed them to make the final sacrifice has crowned them with that crown of which his Apostle wrote when he said in the Name of Christ: "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life."

It is true that a martyr is sometimes said to be "one who is so firmly convinced of the truths of the Christian Religion that he gladly suffers death rather than deny it." (C.E. Vol. IX. p.736.)

No doubt that describes a very large number of the martyrs of the early centuries. But even in those days not all the martyrs were offered the alternative of apostacy or death. Many in the days of persecution were taken and put to death because they were Christians, without any offer of escape by denying the Lord.¹

There was the case where a judge condemned a man's wife to death because she had become a Christian and the husband delated² her to the authorities. When the sentence was passed, two men in the court protested that it was not the law to condemn to death any one solely for being a Christian. Whereupon the judge asked if they were Christians. They confessed that they were; and the judge ordered them to be executed also. The Church did not hesitate to recognise them in her roll of glorious martyrs.

Then there was a terrible persecution which raged along the North of Africa in the days of the Emperor Decius. The condemned were so many that they were made to kneel in rows on the bank of a river and the executioners passed along the ranks and despatched them all. Who can doubt that among those entrapped Christians there were great diversities of sanctity, many degrees of progress in Christlikeness. But who can doubt also that they received every one of them who died in the faith the crown of martyrdom?

Indeed, if we were to restrict the term of martyr to those who chose death rather than apostacy, we should have to exclude the proto-martyr St. Stephen himself. He was not faced with that alternative. He was brave to preach the Gospel to a hostile crowd so earnestly and forcefully that it cost him his life.

Those who for Christ's sake and the Gospel's risk violent death at the hands of man and die rather than be unfaithful are surely rightly numbered amongst "the martyrs of Jesus." They witness in a unique way to the truth that there is something worth more than life, and that something is their loyalty to Christ.

¹ Maynard adds a handwritten marginal note at this point: *Anglo-Saxon martyrology. Kings:-*.

² 'to delate' means 'to accuse, inform against, to cite before an ecclesiastical court'. (*Ed.*)

III. This supreme privilege of witness has now been granted by God to three of the Missionaries of New Guinea: a Priest and two women.

Father James Benson went first to New Guinea in 1919. He stayed only a short time, leaving for reasons of health in 1921. After some parish work, he joined the Community of the Ascension. His mind was always to return to New Guinea, to which sphere he believed God had called him. It was the hope of the Community when he joined that work might be taken up there. When that proved impossible, he was released to go himself in 1937. Since then he has been working at the Mission station of Gona, not far from Buna where the Japanese landed in order to make their way across to Port Moresby.

Sister May Hayman was a trained nurse. She went to Papua in 1937 and has been in charge of the Mission Hospital at Gona since 1939.

Mavis Parkinson was a trained teacher, and the last to join the Mission staff, and the youngest of the missionaries. She came from Brisbane and was working in the same locality as the other two. When Japan declared war, her relatives insisted that she should be returned to Australia; so the Bishop was sending her home. Before she left, however, she received a telegram to say that she was free to make her own decision in regard to staying or leaving. Immediately she decided to stay. Nor was this decision based upon a failure to appreciate the risks. For although no details can be given, it may be said that even after the Japanese had invaded the coast, an opportunity was afforded to these brave women to leave and retire to a place of safety; but they would not leave their post. They knew where they were needed, and they laid down their lives for the people they had gone to serve.

IV. My brethren, it is in such crises that the metal is proved. But it is not in such crises that the metal is created. The characters of those missionaries was formed in the days of peace, and formed in prayer and through the grace of the sacraments. It has been men and women of that type who have been ministering to the natives of Papua in our Anglican Mission for many long years. These were no self-seekers. These are they who, in the eyes of the natives, redeem the character of the white man who often showed himself as a mere exploiter of the defenseless.

If the natives of Papua in this crisis have been loyal to our cause, it is not because they love the trader, who they know is only there for what he can get. It is, thank God, because they have at least something to be thankful for to the White Man; and that something has come to them chiefly through the Missions.

I remember years ago in India talking to an educated Indian who was asking me if natives of other races were decently treated by Australians. I told him that we had a Chinese priest on the staff at St Peter's. He dismissed the statement as not to the point. "That is the Church", he said. "We all know that we have nothing to fear from the people of God."

When will Australia be composed of "the people of God"?

Here is a significant thing: A few days ago a young soldier, who in Australia was a Communist and, if not an atheist, at least had not much time for Religion, wrote to his mother: "Tell Mrs. Anderson that but for the Christian Natives, and the work of the Missions, I don't know where we should have been."

There are times when the world likes the fruits of the Christian Religion. There are times when it wakes up to the fact that without them it must perish.

Men's selfishness and sins, their pride and their covetousness, create discord and strife, resentment and wars. Nation rises against nation. Race against race. The strong exploit the weak, and corrupt themselves with their ill-gotten gains. Then the tables are turned. Revolutions follow. Blood flows in abundance and new struggles for riches begin. That is the age-old way of the world.

Into this turmoil, into this world of distrust and suspicion. Into this world held down by force. Into this world of men, slaves to their sins, — comes the Blessed Lord Jesus Christ preaching that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Rubbish cry the cynics. It’s only another dodge to make money. The Church is after gain like the rest of us — of course it is. Only we are more honest about it.

But all the time their covetousness has blinded them. There is another principle of life abroad. There is another motive for living known to men. Of it Jesus Christ is the supreme example. But He still has His true followers. And these live for what they can give, not for what they can get.

Such true souls have been helping to lift the Papuans out of primitive savagery into life based upon Christian principles. The light of new life shines already in the eyes of many of them as even casual visitors can see. Those who come into close contact with the great Bishop and his missionaries cannot doubt of what quality they are. But that, for the most part, is known only to those who come close to them.

But when three brave souls, for the love of Christ and His black people, die, then, as it were, a great flare goes up to the skies which all can see. Then their witness cannot be hid. Then out of her sorrow the Church can rejoice. For here, though there be loss, there is double gain.

Loss of three brave workers, in an understaffed Mission, yes, a sad loss indeed. But the gain of the crown of life for those whose lives were laid down; And the seal of sincerity set for ever upon their work and the Mission work of the Church. Once more shall it be true, please God, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

They from beyond will pray for us that we, while we live, may likewise be faithful. They from beyond will pray, and we work to answer their prayers, that the people for whom they died shall not go untended; that the Gospel of Jesus shall be carried right into the heart of that dark savage country.

Papua now has its martyrs and confessors. Three dead and four in hard captivity. Soldiers, these, in the cause of Jesus Christ.

Who follows in their train?

The Son of God goes forth to war, a kingly crown to gain;
His blood-red banner streams afar: who follows in his train?

The martyr first, whose eagle eye could pierce beyond the grave,
Who saw his Master in the sky, and called on Him to save.

A noble army, men and boys, the matron and the maid,
Around the Saviour’s throne rejoice, in robes of light arrayed;

They climbed the steep ascent of heaven, through peril, toil and pain:
O God, to us may grace be given to follow in their train.

[Hymn by Reginald Heber, 1783–1826]