

## **6 September 2020 – ABM – Martyrs of New Guinea**

St Cuthbert's Anglican Church, Prospect, Adelaide  
The Right Rev'd Denise Ferguson  
Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Adelaide.

Readings:

Jeremiah 15.15-21

2 Corinthians 6.1-10

Holy God open our ears to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today and always. Amen.

In 2015, while I was attending a course at the Anglican Centre in Rome, I visited the Basilica of San Bartolomeo all'Isola in Rome. A church founded in 998 CE, understood to contain relics of, and named for, St Bartholomew the Apostle.

In the year 2000, this 1000-year-old Church became the centre of a different focus. Pope John Paul II dedicated this place of prayer and worship to the new martyrs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More than 13,000 testimonies were collected and researched in preparation for establishing this ecumenical memorial. The members of the New Martyrs Commission spent two years reconstructing the stories of Christians who, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, paid for their faithfulness to the Gospel with their lives.

Pope John Paul II dedicated six altars of remembrance, representing and honouring those martyred for the faith in the Americas, Africa, Spain & Mexico, those killed in the communist regimes and the Nazi regime. The sixth altar, and the first on the right as you enter the building, witnesses to the faith of those martyred in Asia, Oceania and the Middle East.

Spending time in the basilica was deeply moving and humbling. To see the signs and symbols of ministry in Oceania, tapa cloth, shells and bead work laid out on the altar in tribute touched something deep within me.

In the same year as the Basilica of San Bartolomeo all'Isola was dedicated to the martyrs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an ecumenical prayer gathering was held at the Colosseum, a symbol of martyrdom in itself. It was held in memory of those who had lost their lives for their faith in the twentieth century. At the gathering Pope John Paul II said:

*"The generation to which I belong has experienced the horror of war, concentration camps, persecution. [...] The experience of the Second World War and of the following years led me to consider with grateful attention the shining example of those who, from the early years of the twentieth century to its end, experienced persecution, violence, death, for their faith and their behaviour inspired by the truth of Christ. And there are so many! Their memory must not be lost, on the contrary it must be recovered in a documented way".*

Today we remember twelve ordinary people. All were Christian, some were indigenous Papuans, others were ex-pats. They were missionaries serving as priests, teachers, evangelists, builders; each responding to a call to use their skills to support the people of

Australia's closest neighbour. In 1942 & 1943 they found themselves caught up in what has been described as 'an age of aggression' when the Japanese invaded and occupied the Islands we now know as Papua New Guinea. As the danger intensified, those who were not indigenous were encouraged to evacuate to a place of safety. However, the twelve we remember today chose to stay and serve the people and communities God had entrusted to their care, setting aside their own personal safety.

Tragically, they and many others died, directly or indirectly, at the hands of the Japanese. It is estimated that there were 333 martyrs of these hostilities.

Church History is scattered generously with the stories of the lives of saints and martyrs; ordinary people who lived in the midst of difficulties, uncertainty, and suffering. Despite their circumstances they made extraordinary choices to put their faith into action. Their lives can teach us to do the same.

The deaths of the Martyrs of New Guinea were tragic, but not without a legacy. It is both their lives and their legacy we honour today.

How might we name that legacy?

The tragedy of the martyrs has not diminished the passion to serve. Today, the ministry and support of the Australian Board of Mission continues to flourish in Papua New Guinea: Ordinary people inspiring others through their faith and their behaviour, motivated by the truth of Christ.

The tragedy of the martyrs has enabled a greater understanding of the diversity of humanity. That all are loved and created equally by God.

The tragedy of the martyrs has opened a window that sees Christianity growing vibrantly, reflecting the culture and customs of the people.

The tragedy of the martyrs has, with time, grace and open hearts, begun a journey of reconciliation with those who were the perpetrators of this invasion and destruction.

The legacy of these martyrs isn't only about the ongoing Christian mission in Papua New Guinea.

As we commit to ensuring the memory of these martyrs lives on, what is it that we might learn from this tragedy of war, and commitment to serve?

The reading tonight from Paul's Second Letter to the people of Corinth gives us an insight into how we might embrace and live out the legacy of the Martyrs of New Guinea in our own lives and ministries.

Paul was writing to a community fractured and divided in Corinth. He had invested much. He had laboured long and hard to establish and nurture this fledgling Christian community and had suffered greatly as a consequence. However, he firmly believed that he was called

to be an agent of God's reconciling work. He was willing to humble himself and make himself vulnerable, pleading with the Corinthians to be reconciled with God and to himself.

Maybe, one of the many legacies of the tragedy of the martyrs leaves us is, that with time, grace and open hearts, is a reminder that a journey of reconciliation can begin, even out of the darkest of circumstances.

The call to reconciliation is one of the foundations of our faith. This year has shown us the importance of being true, genuine, authentic agents of reconciliation at so many levels, but are we willing to step out and own the vulnerability that is essential for the journey?

Paul did.

The people of Japan have begun that process.

What will it take for this church of God, the body of Christ, to truly embrace the hard and humbling work of reconciliation and forgiveness?

Paul began by speaking frankly, with an open and vulnerable heart, reminding the people of Corinth, and all who hear, of what God has done for us in Christ.

*Even though we, the people of God, the body of Christ, have caused so much pain and injury, God in Christ takes the risk of vulnerability, humiliation, and suffering in order to reconcile us to himself.*

In turn Paul reminds them, and us, that since we have been reconciled to God in Christ, we are all called to join him in this profound ministry of reconciliation.

As we reconcile with one another, we reconcile with God, witnessing to the world by our *'faith and our behaviour, inspired by the truth of Christ.'*

The challenge to each of us is *Are we ready and willing to take the risk of vulnerability, humiliation, and suffering in order to reconciled to one another?*

May the lives of the martyrs never be in vain, may their story remind us that God works through ordinary Christian people, responding to a call to 'follow me'; to witness to the world by our faith and our behaviour; inspired by the truth of Christ.

May the legacy we have received from the martyrs of New Guinea inspire our legacy for the next generations. Amen.