

Honouring the Martyrs

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Today we wear red to honour St. Bartholomew, apostle and martyr. Throughout the year, the feasts of the martyrs in our liturgical calendar jolt us back into a remembrance of the cost and seriousness of Christian faith. So today on a quiet Bank Holiday weekend in England we honour the death of an obscure disciple who lived as a witness to the resurrection and died a horrible death, according to tradition, where he was martyred by being flayed alive. A very bloody end, even by apostolic standards.

Well, it makes a change from Romans!

Although he is little spoken of today, in mediaeval England Bartholomew developed a rather sensational following which apparently got started when Queen Emma (wife of King Cnut) donated one of his arms to Canterbury Cathedral. (Other relics are scattered around Europe – a skull in Frankfurt, various bones on the little island in the Tiber named after him, and, rather ghoulishly, a large slice of his skin in Sicily!) Even here in Oxford, some of us will know the little Bartlemas Chapel in East Oxford at the site of a mediaeval leper hospital.

He was quite a celebrity in the mediaeval church, but the original Jewish disciple who followed Jesus and later preached his gospel perhaps as far as Armenia and even India remains something of a mystery to Christian historians.

Unsurprisingly, artists and storytellers have given full rein to their imagination in embellishing the scanty details of recorded history. The church in Armenia claims Bartholomew as its founding apostle and cherishes a personal description of him – *with black, curly hair, white skin, large eyes, straight nose, his hair covers his ears, his beard long and grizzled, middle height. He wears a white robe with a purple stripe, and white cloak with four purple gems at the corners. For 26 years he has worn these, and they never grow old. His shoes have lasted 26 years. He prays 100 times a day and 100 times a night. His voice is like a trumpet; angels wait upon him; he is always cheerful, and knows all languages.*

As you'd expect, it was the mediaeval iconographers who created the lasting image of the martyr holding the emblem of a flaying knife with – wait for it – a generous curtain of his own skin neatly draped over his right arm! He is still remembered as the patron saint of tanners and butchers.

Well, fashions in art and devotion come and go over the centuries and today we might well wonder what all this pious exaggeration and celebrity cult status had to do with the real Bartholomew, perhaps a very ordinary Jewish man, who was once inspired to follow Jesus of Nazareth?

Historically, it's ironic that we're not even certain that we know his real name! Most biblical scholars think that the man called Bartholomew in the synoptic gospels' list of the twelve disciples was probably the same character identified as Nathanael in the fourth gospel. But many think that even the name Nathanael was used to represent a kind of composite figure for the Jews who were clear-sighted enough to recognise the coming of Christ as Saviour.

Our martyr remains pretty much a mystery. Two thousand years on we are left with the tiniest shreds of ancient memories of a man who left his mark on the world as nothing more nor less than someone who gave his life and death to serve and follow Jesus Christ.

And today we wear red to honour St. Bartholomew, apostle and martyr.

But if we are honest I think that many Christian people, like most of our secular contemporaries, have learned to be more than a little wary about our forebears' enthusiastic exaltation of bloodshed and martyrdom in the name of their faith. Week by week reports of suicide bombings, and the sickening sight of so-called martyrdom videos played out for a global audience, make us think twice about any uncritical admiration of those who play the martyr card for personal or political advantage. We know too much about the way that suicidal gestures all too easily put others in the wrong. There is a dark side to the celebration of martyrdom which, in our own day, as in many periods of history, can help fuel a horrible vicious circle of retaliatory violence.

If we needed any reminder of this, it was on this day, 24th August, that one of the most awful atrocities in European religious history took place. The feast of St Bartholomew's Day is forever linked, for those with even the faintest recollection of French history, to a ferocious wave of butchery in 1572 when tens of thousands of Protestant Huguenots – men, women and children – were systematically slaughtered at the instigation of Catherine de Medici and their massacre not only approved but triumphantly celebrated by the then Pope Gregory XIII.

Here in England, we have tasted our own enthusiasm for religiously motivated blood letting. I was deeply moved by the recent decision here in Oxford to dedicate a memorial in the University Church to all the martyrs – not just the Protestants on one side or the Catholics on the other – but all those who suffered in the name of religion in the fearful years of violence from 1589 to 1681. Go and look at it when you're next in town: the list of 23 men tried or tortured, burned or hanged, here in Oxford makes sad and shameful reading. We have learned to be wary of an uncritical enthusiasm for the cult of martyrdom.

We need to take care how we honour our martyrs if we are not to indulge on the one hand a childish fascination with the cruelties of primitive people in primitive places, or to perpetuate on the other hand the kind of competitive blood lust that so easily fuels a dangerous spiral of violence not least in times of national or social economic instability. So we do we still keep the martyrs in our calendar, and still wear red to celebrate their sacrifice? Perhaps in our invocation of the noble saints and heroes of the faith we would be wiser to drop the drama and red-blooded rhetoric of martyrdom in favour of something a little less provocative and disturbing?

Yet there is something about that red blood of the martyrs, however squeamish or sophisticated we may feel about it, that is far too important for any Christian to lose sight of. The word *martyr*, after all, means simply *witness*. As committed Christians we need to honour all faithful people who in small and unsensational ways, or in unique and dangerous ways, bear witness to the things that matter so much that they are truly worth giving our lives for. In our more peaceable setting it's terribly easy to forget the seriousness of the struggle which lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. The forces of evil that tear at so much good in our souls and societies don't go on holiday just because it's August!

There's an old Irish perspective on martyrdom which I find very helpful, and quite salutary, in our relatively untroubled times. The early Celtic missionaries taught that there were many honorable and challenging ways of living as a Christian witness or martyr. This is how they explained the cost of discipleship, in an ancient homily from the 7th century.

The *red martyrs* were those whose wholehearted love for God led them to a cruel death. The *white martyrs* were those also honoured for their love of God which drew them to a life of special austerity – as monks or virgins, pilgrims and ascetics – withdrawing from the world in one way or another to seek first the Kingdom of God and the salvation of souls. But no less honoured were those called the *green martyrs* – those serious Christians who lived in the world, not giving up the daily struggle for goodness and purity, but immersing themselves in the service of those around them as living sacrifices for the love of Christ and his Kingdom. They too had the spirit of martyrdom; they too embraced suffering and struggle for the sake of the gospel; and they too were honoured as the faithful seed of a growing church and godly community.

It sheds a helpful light on our own vocation. Living as wholehearted *green martyrs* in our homes and communities, in our work and our economy, in the priorities we set and the sacrifices we make (and we could do worse than beginning to think of green martyrdom in costly environmental terms) will be more than challenging enough for most of us contemporary disciples of Christ crucified.

The essence of martyrdom is nothing more nor less than the witness of radical generosity. It is not about fanaticism. It is not about celebrity. As our gospel reading reminds us, it is not about any kind of personal obsession with being the greatest, even in the Kingdom of God. The essence of martyrdom, like every other form of Christian witness, is a humble determination to serve and follow Christ crucified.

In terms of red-blooded martyrdom, the last hundred years tragically saw more Christians killed than in all the centuries of Roman persecution put together. One of those martyrs was Archbishop Oscar Romero, murdered at the altar in 1980 for his stand against the oppressive Sandinista government in El Salvador. Before his death, this is what he taught about the meaning of martyrdom in the daily determination to live radically and generously for the sake of Christ:

To give one's life is not just being killed by someone. To give one's life is to have the spirit of martyrdom. To give through one's duty, in silence, in prayer, in the faithful performance of one's obligations. In that silence of daily life, to go on giving one's life like the mother who, without fuss, gives birth, suckles her child, helps it grow and looks after it with love. This is to give one's life. Amen.

Margaret Whipp
24 August 2008