

## Martyrdom

Today the Church of England remembers a number of Christian martyrs who died for their faith in Papua New Guinea in 1901 and in 1942. James Chalmers, Oliver Tomkins and some other companions were sent by the London Missionary Society to New Guinea where they met their deaths in 1901. Later during the Second World War in 1942 New Guinea was occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army. Christians were severely persecuted and a number were killed, including two English priests, Vivian Redlich and John Barge. They remained with their people but were betrayed and beheaded, along with seven Australians and two Papuan evangelists, Leslie Gariadi and Lucian Tapiedi.

We tend to think of Christian martyrdom as something that happened in the distant past, but remembering these martyrs of the twentieth century reminds us that this remains a modern phenomenon. Indeed men and women are still killed for refusing to renounce their faith. Most obviously we think of the plight of Christians in Syria and Iraq, in Pakistan and Nigeria. And yet there are other places where Christians suffer for their faith, even to the point of death.

We have to acknowledge, though, that the idea of martyrdom has been rather debased in recent times. Almost every week we hear of suicide bombers and others who die committing atrocities in the mistaken belief that it will help their cause. This is made worse when they are then hailed by their supporters as martyrs.

And so how do we distinguish real martyrs from such people? Our reading this morning from our Lord's final discourses to his disciples (John 15.8-17) provides the answer. The answer is love. Love is the mark of the true martyr.

For Christians the model is Jesus himself, the one who selflessly and truly laid down his life for his friends. In his case his friends are all of us, sinful humanity. For he himself was without sin. His death on the cross was an act of love. His very motivation was love.

Martyr means witness and Christian martyrs are those who witness to the love of God revealed in Jesus. There is no place in true martyrdom on the part of the one martyred for any thoughts of violence or revenge, of hatred or fanaticism. The true martyr is motivated only by love and devotion to God.

Sadly we live in a violent world where self-interest and entrenched positions flourish and can be very destructive. Jesus challenges that, and for us to follow him means to challenge that too. His words to his disciples and to us two thousand years later are quite clear: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.12). We pray for strength from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to live up to that in our own lives.

*2 September 2016  
Kingsley Boulton*