

Janani Luwum, Archbishop of Uganda

Today the Church of England commemorates Janani Luwum who was Archbishop of Uganda in the nineteen seventies and is remembered as one on the Christian martyrs of the twentieth century.

The following summary of his life is taken from the book "Exciting Holiness" that we use here on saints days:

"Janani Luwum was born in 1922 at Acholi in Uganda. His childhood and youth were spent as a goatherd but he quickly showed an ability to learn and absorb knowledge when given the opportunity. Soon after he became a teacher, he was converted to Christianity and was eventually ordained in 1956, becoming Bishop of Northern Uganda in 1969 and Archbishop of Uganda in 1974. Idi Amin had come to power in Uganda in 1971 as the result of a military coup and his undemocratic and harsh rule was the subject of much criticism by the Church and others. After receiving a letter from the bishops protesting at the virtual institution of state murder, Janani and two of Amin's own government ministers were stated as having been found dead following a car accident. It emerged quickly that they had in fact died on the implicit instructions of the President. Janani's enthusiasm for the good news of Jesus, combined with his willingness to sacrifice even his own life for what he believed in, led him to his martyrdom on this day in 1977."

Our own Archbishop of York also spoke out against the regime of Idi Amin and after a brief time in prison had to flee his native Uganda for the United Kingdom in 1974.

The whole issue of the relationship between Church and state is a complex one. At times the Church has seemed to be little more than an arm of the state. Yet at other times representatives of the Church have stood up against unjust and cruel regimes. Some like Archbishop Luwum paid the price with their lives. They spoke out publicly against what they saw as those in power acting against the gospel message of justice, goodness, compassion and love. Violence, self-seeking and a disregard for the rights of others are contrary to the values of the kingdom of God. People like Janani Luwum could see that and they spoke and acted accordingly. For true peace only comes with real justice.

We give thanks for their witness and the stand they took and we preserve their memory. But how would we act in such a situation? Would we be as courageous or would we maintain a low profile and keep quiet?

In this country we enjoy many blessings and are thankfully free from extreme oppression such as that which prevailed in Uganda in the nineteen seventies. And yet there are things in our own country that are wrong against which Christians should speak out, such as prejudice, intolerance, hatred. May we be given the strength and the courage to resist and challenge those evil forces.

17 February 2017, Kingsley Boulton