

‘Martyrdom and Communion in the 20th century – a Church of England perspective’

St Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: ‘The martyrs of the last days will surpass all martyrs.’¹ In recent years, the language of martyrdom has been extended to include those who die for their beliefs, irrespective of the content of these beliefs. Moreover it has also been claimed by those whose ideological or religious convictions are at best indifferent and at worst actively hostile to Christian faith. There has, however, always been a need for some sifting. Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, describes something like a competition for martyrdom amongst Christian sects, among them the Montanists and the Marcionites, where the number of martyrs was often understood to correlate with the truth of their beliefs. Of the Marcionites, he writes: ‘They say they have an immense number of martyrs of Christ, but as regards Christ, they do not truly acknowledge him.’²

In this paper, I try to draw out three distinctive dimensions of Christian martyrdom through the lens of ‘Martyrdom and Communion’. The first is martyrdom as necessarily deriving from communion with God, in Christ. The martyr is *one in whom Christ lives*. The second is martyrdom as a manifestation of *belonging* within the Body of Christ, a Body which embraces and transcends every ethnic and cultural identity. When one suffers all suffer. The third is Christian martyrdom as a manifestation of God’s love for *all*. This includes those *outside* the visible Church and even -and perhaps uniquely - *enemies*.

T.S. Eliot, perhaps the best known western poet of the 20th century, was an Anglican who was deeply influenced by the 16th century bishop and scholar, Lancelot Andrewes. (Andrewes’ life and writings have in turn been recognised and honoured within Orthodoxy, not least in Nicholas Lossky’s book ‘*Lancelot Andrewes the Preacher: Origins of the Mystical Theology of the Church of England*’.) In the play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot examines the last days of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. In Becket’s Christmas day sermon, entitled *The Glory of God*, preached four days before his own martyrdom, he says this:

¹ *Catechetical Lectures on Illumination*. XV:17

² *Ecclesiastical History* V.xv.20-22.161

‘A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for saints are not made by accident. It is never the design of man for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.’

Eliot writes of the martyr as one ‘*who has lost his will in the will of God.*’ This language is resonant of the words of Diadochus of Photike (5th cent.) who wrote that ‘all of us who are human beings are in the image of God. But to be in his likeness belongs only to those who by great love *have attached their freedom to God.*’³ So we may see martyrdom as a fruit of a willing self-surrender to God’s purposes. When the knights come to Canterbury Cathedral to murder the Archbishop, his priests urge him to escape. Becket replies ‘Open the doors. I give my life; I am ready to suffer with my blood.’ So his life, in this sense is not so much *taken* as *freely given*. Christian life, Christian martyrdom flows from the life of Christ in us, Christ who says ‘No-one takes my life from me but I lay it down of my own accord.’⁴

In his sermon, Becket asks: is it an accident that the day after the celebration of the Incarnation, the Church celebrates the martyrdom of St Stephen? He answers ‘By no means!’. There is an inexorable connection between the incarnation of Christ, our baptism into Christ and martyrdom. We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. As Archbishop Anastasios of Albania has put it Christians are called to ‘an existential participation in the death and life of Christ’.⁵ In 1920s Moscow, Julia de Beasobre was close to despair at the imprisonment of her husband by the GPU and at the Communist persecution of Christians. She describes hearing what she calls ‘the unspoken words of Another’ – meaning God - in which he said: ‘Because of my Incarnation and your Baptism, there is no other way – if you agree.’⁶ No other way but martyrdom – ‘if you agree’.

There is an intrinsic cruciformity to all Christian life. Anglicans and Orthodox have together affirmed that ‘Informed by the life and work of God in the baptismal and Eucharistic liturgy, the Church always seeks to die and be raised again.’⁷ The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama , writes, from the context of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that: ‘Biblical truth is not an intact

³ *Gnostic Chapters*,4 (SC5 bis p86)

⁴ John 10.18

⁵ *Mission in Christ’s Way*, p152.

⁶ *Julia de Beausobre: A Russian Christian in the West*. Babington Smith DLT 1983

⁷ *Church of the Triune God* 1.9 p15

truth but a *suffered* truth.’⁸ As St Paul writes ‘Dying, and yet we live.’⁹ Outside one of the monasteries I visited on Mt Athos were the words ‘Unless you die before you die, you will die when you die.’

The second strand of martyrdom and communion derives from the *corporate* dimension of the body of Christ. The martyrdom of even one member of the Body impacts on the whole Body of Christ. St Paul writes ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.’¹⁰ St Silouan of Athos writes ‘The suffering of the other is my suffering, my neighbour’s healing is my healing. My brother’s glory will be my glory.’¹¹ The author of Hebrews writes ‘Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.’¹² Christian martyrdom even of one Christian is an event that happens to the whole church, across any and all national and cultural boundaries. As an expression of this Christian solidarity across ethnic and denominational boundaries, Westminster Abbey celebrates in stone the lives and witness of ten 20th century Christian martyrs from different countries and different parts of the Church family. I write this, however, deeply conscious of the Western Church’s frequent failure to express sufficiently the solidarity and support for the suffering churches of the East, a solidarity to which we are inescapably called.

Fresh in our minds - and in our continuing prayers - is the witness of the two Metropolitans of Aleppo, Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Pavlos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church, abducted when together on a mission to release two abducted priests, Father Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church and Father Maher of the Armenian Catholic Church. This solidarity in Christ which was to prove so costly reflects something of the depth of the *koinonia* evident amongst Church leaders of all denominations in Aleppo – that I was privileged to witness on my visit in 2007. They met together regularly to pray, witnessing to Christ ‘who has broken down the dividing walls’¹³ ‘If one member suffers, all suffer with it.’¹⁴

Going back earlier into the 20th century, Patriarch Tikhon was arrested in Moscow on May 5th 1922 for protesting about the confiscation of Church

⁸ *No handle on the Cross* Koyama 1976:29

⁹ 2 Cor.6.9

¹⁰ 1 Cor.12.26

¹¹ *Salvation according to St Silouan*. Kallistos of Diokleia, Sobornost 19.1.p46.

¹² Hebrews 13.3

¹³ Ephesians 2.14

¹⁴ 1 Cor.12.26

assets by the Soviet state. He was tried and put under house arrest. By this stage the Church of England had already been supporting Russian refugees for some time. Archbishop Randall Davidson had called upon all Dioceses to pray for the persecuted Church in Russia. Following the arrest of the Patriarch, Metropolitan Khrapovitskii appealed to the Archbishop to intervene. Davidson spoke out in the British Parliament urging the cause of the Patriarch and the persecuted Russian church. He also protested directly to the Soviet authorities in Moscow. On May 8th 1923, the British ambassador to Moscow, Hodson, delivered an ultimatum from the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, to the Soviet Government. It included these words 'A country in which faith is persecuted and the servants of the altar have been crucified must be struck off the list of civilised countries.' Canon Anthony Douglas campaigned actively in Parliament and in the country, rousing public opinion against the injustices perpetrated by the State against the Patriarch and the Church in Russia. Douglas records that 'there was almost unanimous protest in the House of Commons about this suggesting that if the Patriarch were to be executed, war would follow.' The Soviet Ambassador, Krassin, came to England to ask Douglas 'How can we fend off war?' Douglas responded 'by releasing Tikhon and stopping the shooting of the Roman Catholic Archbishop.' Douglas wrote in his diary 'Krassin went off and rang me two hours later saying that the advice had been accepted in Moscow.'¹⁵

There have been many such examples of solidarity between sister churches of different countries which express an organic link between costly witness and *koinonia*, between martyrdom and communion. Alerted, by Fr Nikolai Velimirovich, to the plight of the Serbian people suffering the effects of typhus and warfare, many English and Scottish Doctors, medical workers, relief workers and chaplains gave their services to the sick and to wounded Serbian soldiers. In 1918, the Serbian Prime Minister, Pasic, said 'The Anglican Church has taken care of her sister Serbia, may it be that by the aid of the Almighty, this work of charity for the Church of Serbia may be the foundation for the rapprochement and union of our two churches for the good of all humanity.'

Anglican clergy, including Douglas, lobbied the British parliament to take a stand against the Armenian massacres and in Nov. 1915, Anglican and Orthodox leaders together urged the US President, Woodrow Wilson, to

¹⁵ Sobornost 33.2 Andrei Psarev p39

pressure Germany to intervene with the Turkish Government to stop the massacres.

More recently, in the last decades of the Soviet Union, from the late 1960s, Canon Dr Michael Bourdeaux and Keston College did extraordinary and inspiring work, often in dangerous circumstances, to alert the West to the persecution of Christians – and indeed other religions – by the Soviet regime. Such witness to the suffering of the Church in Russia did much to evoke a prayerful solidarity amongst western Christians. The Christian martyrdom served to inspire a deeper sense of belonging and communion within the wider Body of Christ.

Thirdly, martyrdom can be seen as a reflection of Christ's unconditional love for all – even enemies. On the cross Jesus speaks words of forgiveness 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'¹⁶ When St Stephen is being stoned to death, he falls to his knees and cries out 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.'¹⁷ St Silouan describes 'Love of your enemies as the one true criterion of Orthodoxy.' St Nikolai Velimirovich who met with St Silouan expresses such a love in his *Prayers by the Lake*: 'Bless my enemies, O Lord. And I bless them and do not curse them. My enemies have driven me more into your arms than my friends have. My friends have bound me to the earth; my enemies have loosened my bonds from the earth and have destroyed all my hopes in the world. Bless my enemies Lord, and I bless them.'¹⁸

This love, Christ's love, which includes even enemies, transcends all national, ethnic and cultural loyalties and indeed enmities. It is the love that has broken down all human dividing walls.

We see it in Edith Cavell- an English nurse and daughter of an Anglican priest. She served in German occupied Belgium in the First World War. She nursed all who were wounded saving the lives not only of Allied troops but also of German troops without discrimination. She was accused of treason for saving the lives of some Allied troops by helping them escape to Holland. When facing execution by firing squad she said: 'I have no fear, nor shrinking. I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me. This I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity... *I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.*'

¹⁶ Luke 23.34

¹⁷ Acts 7.60

¹⁸ Prayers by the Lake LXXV

We see it in Shabaz Bhatti, a Roman Catholic Federal Minister for Minorities in Pakistan. He was an outspoken critic of Pakistan's blasphemy laws under which Christians have been – and continue to be - persecuted, imprisoned and receive rough justice. Bhatti spoke out not only for Christians but other non-Muslim faiths too. He received many death threats. In March 2011 he was assassinated and called 'a blasphemer of Mohammed'. Before his death he had said: 'I believe in Jesus Christ, who has given his own life for us and I'm ready to die. I'm living for my community, I will die to defend their rights.'

We see it in the martyrdom of the seven Trappist brothers of Tibhirine in Algeria, who chose to stay in their monastery having been threatened by armed men and knowing of the threat to their lives and those around them. They chose to stay living a life of simplicity, prayer and welcome, a life also of service to the very poor who lived around them. Knowing of the probability of their imminent death, Father Christian de Cherge wrote in his *Spiritual Testament*: 'I hope when the time comes to be conscious enough to ask pardon from God and from my brothers in humanity, and at the same time to forgive my aggressor with all my heart.' In words addressed to the unknown one who is to kill him, he writes: 'And for you too, friend of the last hour, who did not know what you were doing, I wish this THANK YOU and A-DIEU and that we may meet again as happy thieves in paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us all. Amen!'¹⁹

In all these martyrdoms, as in the witness of Charles de Foucauld, assassinated outside the fort he had built for the Tuareg people in the Sahara, we see a manifestation of God's love for *all* humanity. In the words of Gregory of Nyssa 'we discover in every human being whatever their faith position or life history a brother or sister for whom Christ died.'²⁰

This is the love that so identifies with others who suffer that it is willing to take on their suffering and even change places with them. We see it in German occupied Greece, Archbishop Damaskinos Papanandreu, resisting the deportation of the Jews, writes to the collaborator Greek Prime Minister, Logothetopoulos 'Our Holy Religion does not recognise superior or inferior qualities based on religion. As it is stated "there is neither Greek nor Jew"'. He was threatened with the firing squad for speaking out. We see it in 1944 in Zakynthos, Metropolitan Chrisostomos with the Mayor, Lucas Carrer, did all

¹⁹ *Spiritual Testament*.

²⁰ tbc

they could do protect the Jews from deportation to concentration camps. When asked to hand over a list of all the Jews on the island, Chrisostomos handed over a list with only two names, his own and that of the Mayor, saying 'If you choose to deport the Jews of Zakyntos, you must also take me and I will share their fate.'²¹

We see such an identification too in Mother Maria Skobtsova. When the Jews were being targeted by the Nazis in Paris and forced to wear the Star of David, Mother Maria wrote 'If we were true Christians we would all wear the Star.'²² In March 1945 she herself was taken to Ravensbrook and, it is said, took the place of a Jewish woman going in to the Gas chamber. Mother Maria was martyred not for her solidarity with Christians but with Jews, her martyrdom expressing God's deep love for all humanity.

Christian martyrdom reveals Christ's love for all, a love that crosses all human boundaries transcending all nationalistic and tribal loyalties. Every human being is one made in the image of God. Every human being is, in the memorable phrase of Father Christian de Cherge, a 'brother or sister in humanity'. Every human being is one for whom Christ died.

John Donne (1572-1631), poet and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, affirms in his poem '*No man is an Island*': 'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.'

+John Warwick
1st August 2016

²¹ *Crowns of Barbed Wire*: Moorey p112

²² *Crowns of Barbed Wire*: Moorey p123